THE TEN BEST GAMES OF THE GENERATION

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THE SIMS 4
HYRULE WARRIORS
THE WALKING DEAD: SEASON TWO
INFAMOUS: FIRST LIGHT

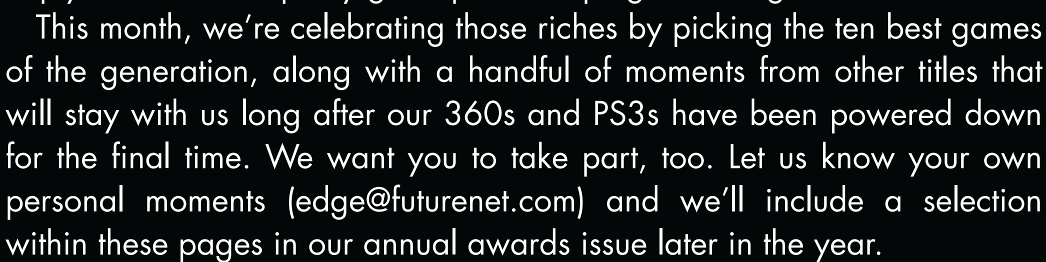
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NOVEMBER 2014



Generation games



Nine years ago, the most notable Xbox 360 exclusives that arrived with the console's launch were *Kameo: Elements Of Power*, *Perfect Dark Zero* and *Condemned: Criminal Origins*. A year later, the equivalents on PlayStation 3 were *Resistance: Fall Of Man*, *Ridge Racer 7* and *Genji: Days Of The Blade*. Today, we can still recall the grimaces on early adopters' faces as they tried to come to terms with what this new generation of videogames was supposed to represent. But we've become better at accepting that launch games aren't what they used to be, and we simply no longer expect to be gifted a *Super Mario World* or a *Ridge Racer* on day one. And we wait. And then, years later, it becomes quite difficult to believe that we once had anything other than dismal expectations of a game whose headline features included giant enemy crabs and weapons that could be changed in realtime. The riches we've enjoyed since do a pretty good job of helping us to forget.


This month, we're celebrating those riches by picking the ten best games of the generation, along with a handful of moments from other titles that will stay with us long after our 360s and PS3s have been powered down for the final time. We want you to take part, too. Let us know your own personal moments (edge@futurenet.com) and we'll include a selection within these pages in our annual awards issue later in the year.

Creating the kind of action that sticks in the mind is a driving force for the people behind *Far Cry 4*, and in the future, perhaps whistling past a snowy mountainside in a wingsuit will be a moment that deserves a place in a feature looking back on the PS4/Wii U/Xbox One generation. In this issue's cover story, the team at Ubisoft Montreal explains what lies beyond the game's co-op support, its mountaineering, and the small matter of being able to pilot a rampaging elephant into battle.

Finally, if you haven't yet tried the digital edition of **Edge**, now may be the best time to start – see p107 for details of how to download it for free.

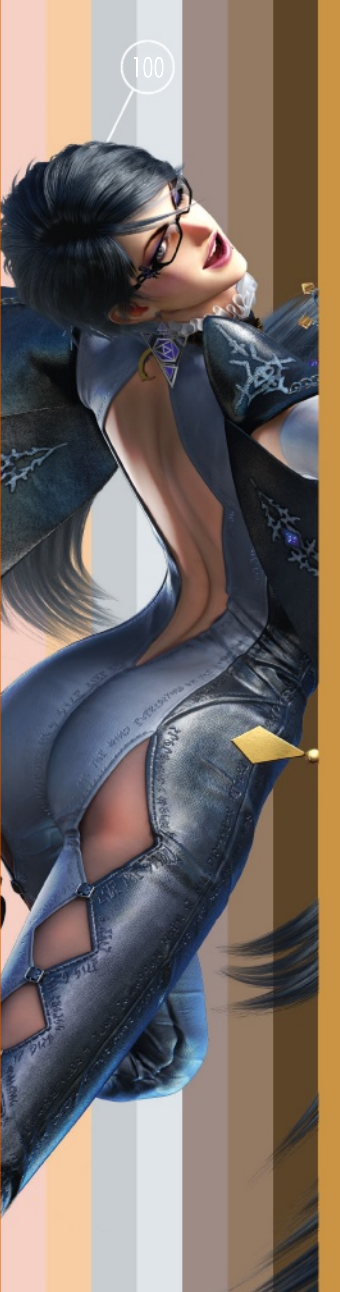


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EDITORIAL
Tony Mott editor in chief **Nathan Brown** deputy editor
Michael Gapper news/features editor **Ben Maxwell** writer
Matthew Clapham production editor
Mark Wynne senior art editor **Andrew Hind** art editor

CONTRIBUTORS
Ian Bogost, Rose Brandle, Martin Davies, Lee Hall, James Leach, Edward Lewis, Steven Poole, Chris Schilling, Chris Thursten, Alvin Weetman

BUSINESS
Steve Turner account manager **Charlie Said** sales director
Adam Jones senior product manager **Sam Wight** group marketing manager

CONTACT US
Editorial +44 (0)1225 442244 edge@futurenet.com
Advertising +44 (0)207 0424265 steve.turner@futurenet.com
UK print subscriptions 0844 8482852
International print subscriptions +44 (0)1604 250145
Subscribe online at www.myfavouritemagazines.com

FUTURE GAMES UK
Daniel Dawkins editor in chief **Graham Dalzell** art director

FUTURE UK
Declan Gough head of music, games and film **Nial Ferguson** managing director

CIRCULATION
Matt Cooper trade marketing executive **Rachael Cock** trade marketing director
John Lawton international account manager

PRINT & PRODUCTION
Mark Constance production manager **Frances Twentyman** production controller
Nathan Drewett ad production co-ordinator

LICENSING
Regina Erak senior licensing and syndication manager

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Future, Quay House, The Ambury,
Bath BA1 1UA United Kingdom
Telephone: +44 (0)1225 442244
Fax: +44 (0)1225 732275



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Chief executive Zillah Byng-Maddick
Non-executive chairman Peter Allen
Tel +44 (0)207 042 4000 (London)
Tel +44 (0)1225 442 244 (Bath)



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Nintendo's true colours

New Nintendo 3DS underlines the company's change of direction

Shigeru Miyamoto may have made it abundantly clear in our recent interview that Nintendo is no longer targeting the expanded audience it so successfully courted with DS and Wii, but some wanted more proof. Barely 24 hours after **E**271 hit shelves, they had it. During a Japan-only Nintendo Direct, Satoru Iwata revealed the confusingly titled New Nintendo 3DS (and New 3DS XL, AKA LL in Japan), set to launch in the territory in October, and heading westward in early 2015. It's a piece of hardware laser targeted at a very specific audience.

Not for nothing did the first sight of the new hardware linger lovingly over the red, green, blue and yellow face buttons on the regular model. It's a design choice intended to provoke a warm glow of nostalgia in those who recall the Super Famicom, a calculated move to raise the pulses of loyalists, and one that sends out a clear message: we hope you like our old direction.

Likewise the C-button, an analogue nub on the right-hand side of the new machine, positioned just above those face buttons. It's apparently named after GameCube's C-stick – another sign that Nintendo wants to appeal to those who stuck with it through its leanest times – and it's even more diminutive. If there was any scrap of doubt left as to the target market, it was instantly dispelled in the first piece of footage demonstrating how the C-button might be used in a game, which saw a player swing the camera around in *Monster Hunter 4G* – a title that, not coincidentally, launches on the same day as the two new models in Japan. It would be a stretch to suggest this is a hardware refresh to accommodate a single series, but given Capcom used New 3DS units to demo *Monster Hunter*'s latest entry at Tokyo Game Show, and that a silver *4G*-themed limited edition bundle will be available on day one, there should be no shortage of early adopters.

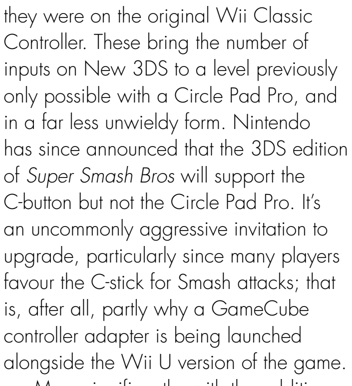
> Not for nothing did the first sight of the hardware linger over the red, green, blue and yellow face buttons

Iwata had another surprise up his sleeve, and it was an equally powerful statement of intent. A port of Wii's widely lauded *Xenoblade Chronicles* is heading exclusively to the New 3DS models, the first game to take advantage of the hardware's improved CPU. Iwata might not have explicitly said as much, but the subtext might as well have been skywriting: this is the kind of game we can do with a new, more powerful system. Nintendo also showed off a variety of other benefits: larger screens, with self-adjusting brightness based on environmental lighting; reduced loading times; more rapid eShop downloads; and a greatly increased viewing angle for its stereoscopic 3D images. It's difficult to see the audience that bought *Wii Sports* and *Brain Training* caring much about these additions, but diehard fans will.

Then there's the small matter – and small is the operative word – of the ZL and ZR buttons, situated just inside of the left and right shoulder buttons, much as



The new packaging for the standard model highlights the range of custom face plates, a pleasingly user-focused move that should reduce the number of special-edition hardware bundles in future



they were on the original Wii Classic Controller. These bring the number of inputs on New 3DS to a level previously only possible with a Circle Pad Pro, and in a far less unwieldy form. Nintendo has since announced that the 3DS edition of *Super Smash Bros* will support the C-button but not the Circle Pad Pro. It's an uncommonly aggressive invitation to upgrade, particularly since many players favour the C-stick for Smash attacks; that is, after all, partly why a GameCube controller adapter is being launched alongside the Wii U version of the game.

More significantly, with the addition of built-in Near Field Communication compatibility, Nintendo has ensured total feature parity with Wii U. New 3DS will have exactly the same number of possible inputs as a GamePad, suggesting a tentative first step towards crossplatform play. Which isn't to say that New 3DS is going to be able to run Wii U games – visually speaking, *Xenoblade Chronicles* doesn't appear to be tangibly superior to the best-looking games on 3DS – but ▶



When all else fails, Nintendo can rely on nostalgia. In a brief English-language trailer for New 3DS, an a cappella version of the *Super Mario World* theme prefaced a look at the Super Famicom-inspired face buttons

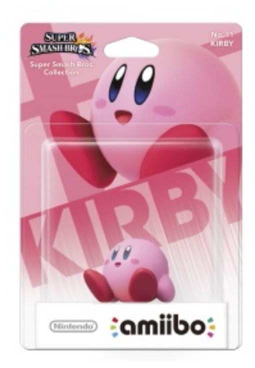


SHELL OUT

1 From October, all 3DS owners will be able to buy new home menu themes from the eShop, allowing them to change their menu background, icons, music and sound effects. 2 The Circle Pad Pro may not be officially redundant, but Nintendo's refusal to support it in *Smash Bros* is a definite push to upgrade. 3 The New Nintendo 3DS XL comes in Metallic Blue and Metallic Black finishes at launch, but won't support the variety of custom plates that can be applied to the front and back of smaller models. 4 There will be a range of 38 interchangeable plates available from launch, with variants based on *Zelda*, *Mario* and *Animal Crossing* as well as basic patterns and solid colours. They're not cheap, ranging in price from ¥1,000 to ¥3,000 (approx £6 to £17).





























FIGURES OF FUN
We're accustomed to others following Nintendo's lead, but with Amiibo, it's playing catch-up, attempting to cash in on the toy-game market dominated by *Skylanders* and *Disney Infinity*. The key difference is that Amiibo characters are designed to work across multiple game series, allowing you to access different content within each. In the Wii U version of the new *Super Smash Bros*, for example, you'll be able to scan in your Amiibo figure to fight against or alongside you, or put it into battle against AI characters to boost its defence stats and learn new moves. How that data will transfer into other games (Nintendo has promised functionality within *Mario Kart 8*, *Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker* and *Yoshi's Woolly World*) remains to be seen, and it's curious to note that the first batch of 12 – which will launch this winter alongside *Smash Bros* – is titled 'the *Super Smash Bros* collection', suggesting we'll see multiple variants of the Mushroom Kingdom gang. At £11 each, they're reasonably priced, and while parents might baulk at paying for yet more plastic figures, they'll certainly be desirable to the company's loyal fans as well as its younger ones.

this is still a noteworthy development for a company that has already unified its console and handheld divisions. Particularly given that, despite earlier experiments with connectivity on DS and Wii (and, to a much lesser extent, GameCube and Game Boy Advance), we've not seen 3DS and Wii U talking to one another much so far.

In theory, such a move should reduce development spans and cost, and it's not before time, too: with thirdparty support at a very low ebb, particularly on Wii U, Nintendo has laboured to simultaneously support two different consoles with a steady stream of releases. Many assume that Nintendo's next piece of hardware will be a device that functions as a portable and can be plugged into the TV, though another approach is two devices – like iPhone and iPad – that share the same software. Nintendo will, of course, first need to modernise its rather archaic stance on user accounts and cross-compatibility, but New 3DS certainly seems to be a step in the right direction.

There are naturally problems with such a change of direction, not least that Nintendo has forcibly driven a wedge between the 40-million-plus players who already own a 3DS and adopters of the new hardware. Few thirdparties will be particularly keen to support the device in any meaningful way, since doing so will deprive them of millions of potential sales. And would Nintendo ever make a *Mario* or *Zelda* game exclusive to New 3DS? Though it could certainly do with more system sellers, such a move is highly unlikely, especially given Nintendo's

current sales issues – though wags will no doubt suggest Nintendo has had plenty of experience in supporting hardware with a limited userbase lately.

Xenoblade may yet be followed by more ports, but more likely than a spate of exclusives is an 'improved on New 3DS' approach, whereby selected games benefit from augmented graphics, more fluid framerates or possibly even additional features tailored to the advanced hardware. Either way, Nintendo will surely be hoping its catalogue is more Game Boy Color than DSi in terms of exclusives – though the latter had a 200-strong suite of downloadable titles, you could count the number of DSi-only retail games in any territory on three fingers or fewer.

Though Nintendo has rarely gone more than 18 months between hardware upgrades for its portable systems, the timing of this announcement is critical. "Fortunately, because of the spread of smart devices, people take games for granted now," said Miyamoto, though that first word may well have been spoken through gritted teeth, given how mobile gaming has eaten into Nintendo's market share. This paradigm shift has been visible in the west for some time now, but it's arguably only recently that it's had a palpable effect in Japan.

A worldwide sales drop from 1.4m 3DS units in the first quarter of the prior fiscal year to 820,000 over the same period this year could be attributed to the lower number of essential titles released during that time. Nintendo has been busy attempting to buoy the flagging Wii U, so it hasn't been able to keep up a regular flow of must-buy games for its portable. Yet in Japan, too, where the console enjoys considerably superior thirdparty support, the story is similar: between January and July 2014, 3DS sold 1.2 million units, a 40 per cent drop over the same six-month period the year before. Level-5's phenomenally popular *Yo-Kai Watch 2* passed a million sales within a week of launch; over the same seven days, 3DS sales increased to just 62,000 units.

An upgrade, then, is surely the most sensible solution to boost sales of a console that may have just about reached saturation point in Japan. It's well timed, too: the weeks prior to Tokyo Game Show are commonly a fallow period for big announcements, and this latest Direct has managed to put 3DS back in people's thoughts when distractions are at a minimum. The games revealed at TGS are typically a long way from release, whereas New 3DS is out within a month, and those who buy one have *Super Smash Bros*, *Pokémon Omega Ruby/Alpha Sapphire*, *Monster Hunter 4G*, and *Final Fantasy Explorers* to look forward to before the year is out. Nintendo has stumbled an awful lot of late, but this demonstrates what a shrewd operator it can still be.

Nintendo has stumbled an awful lot of late, but this demonstrates what a shrewd operator it can still be

It's also a judicious reminder that, despite its recent focus on the fortunes of Wii U, Nintendo does still care about 3DS. True, it may not have an ecosystem to compete with Apple or Sony, but it's making efforts to improve it: bringing its portable hardware to feature parity with its home console (most pertinently with the cross-compatible Amiibo figurines) is the clearest evidence of that so far. Perhaps more significantly, this is another reassuring sign of a long-awaited shift in focus back to those who grew up playing Nintendo's games. With New 3DS, Nintendo has introduced an attractive piece of portable hardware at just the right time – further proof that the new direction Miyamoto heralded last month is as drastic a shift as his words implied. ■

Gaur Plains may not look quite as majestic on the small screen, but the urge to revisit one of the finest JRPGs in recent times is strong. *Xenoblade*'s quest structure should make it a fine fit for portable play, and we suspect it won't be the only port we see over the next 12 months



Visionaries

Activision Publishing CEO Eric Hirshberg on why success is about innovation, not deep pockets

Bungie's *Destiny* began breaking records even before it was released. It's not only been billed as the most expensive game ever made, but also the most preordered game in history. It's a colossal bet characteristic of Activision's laser-focused approach to publishing, concentrating only on games that the company believes will reap big rewards. But while it only trades in blockbusters, there's little timidity in the projects it chooses. *Destiny* blends MMORPG and FPS mechanics, *Skylanders* created a whole new genre that has since been adopted by publishing behemoths Nintendo and Disney, and the next *Call Of Duty* intends to shake up the series' multiplayer. Activision Publishing CEO **Eric Hirshberg** is, naturally, pleased with the company's recent performance, but as we discover when we meet with him to discuss the company's future, he's in no way complacent about that success.

Across 2011 and 2012, the publishing side of the game industry effectively declared the death of the mid-budget production. Two years on, is that still the case for Activision?
It's fair to say that we are a very focused company; we try to do a few things, and we try to do them exceptionally well. We try to bet on things we think have the potential to have massive appeal. But it's important to remember that *Skylanders* started out as a small project. The original scope was a single-platform *Spyro* game, but Paul Ritchie and Toys For Bob came up with the breakthrough idea of bringing a toy to life through a portal. We saw that and decided to change the scope and go big with it. We were proven successful.

So it doesn't matter where the ideas come from; it's more about the ability to focus on the potential of a concept.
Yeah, and it's a good one because it follows gamers' behaviour. Gamers are also very focused: people play the games they love all year round, they play them with friends, social communities sprout up around them, and then there's an appetite for follow-on content. It's an attitude that gamers seem to appreciate, but I think it's important to keep experimenting and keep looking for the next new thing.

"A lot of the time, you don't know where the next idea is going to come from. It's a moving target"

So who's in charge of finding the next massive brand?
A lot of time, you don't know where the next idea is going to come from. It's a moving target. Innovation often comes serendipitously, like with *Skylanders*. As I explained, Toys For Bob wasn't told, 'Go figure out how to turn this single-platform *Spyro* game into our next billion-dollar franchise'. We just saw a great idea and we amplified it. So sometimes it's like that, and sometimes it's more deliberate, like what we're doing with Bungie: we see a great developer with a huge track record that has a big idea for a new franchise, one that I think we can realise the vision for and market successfully to a wide audience. And then sometimes it comes from one of our internal studios having an interesting idea that we give some time and funding to follow up on. We've got lots of those in the works right now.



Eric Hirshberg, CEO, Activision Publishing



Do you intend to further explore the subsidiary model that you've set up with Sledgehammer?
We're always looking for talent, and we're always looking to get the best developers and the best people across the industry at Activision. And Glen and Michael [Schofield and Condrey, who founded Sledgehammer after leaving Visceral Games] have been a huge success story in that respect. But you also have to pair the right people with the right opportunities. We're not a company that shares its chips around the table; we pick a few things and then try to go really big with them. It's about pairing great talent with a great concept

that has real appeal to the audience. Put those three things together, and that's when you get great results.

So how does bringing Sierra back as a label factor into all of this?
We're a bunch of passionate gamers and the building is full of people who have a tremendous amount of nostalgia for and affinity with Sierra and its brands. We thought there was an opportunity there to do something with independent studios, and in terms of getting the next great talent, who knows where that will lead? And we think that doing something with a small, lean team will make a lot of passionate gamers pretty happy.

With *Hearthstone* and *Skylanders: Trap Team*, you seem to be pushing onto tablets aggressively, too.
Yeah. That's another innovation: nobody before us has been able to get that full console experience, day and date with the console release, onto tablet. And the industrial design of the portal and the controller are great – it's a really satisfying experience. And then you can put the controller back in its garage on the portal, pick up the tablet, get in the back seat of mum's car and the game goes with you. It'll open up the game to a whole new audience as there are lots of kids for whom the tablet is their gaming platform – they might not even have a console.

With both Disney and Nintendo going up against the *Skylanders* concept, are you worried about the competition?
Well, I think it was only a matter of time before competitors got into the fray given the scale of success that *Skylanders* has had. But that just makes *Skylanders* just like any other game we make; we have strong competition with all of them. *Skylanders* was the anomaly for a short period of time – we invented the category – and we tend to not focus on our competition; we just focus on making the best games we can make. That sounds like a packaged answer, but it's really true. What got *Skylanders* this far was breakthrough innovation and making kids say, "Wow". That's what we have to keep doing, and I feel like as much as there are other companies out there with strong IP, they're going to have a hard time topping our innovations. While others are just getting into the toys-to-life genre we created three years ago, we're still pushing it further with new ideas. We're going to keep finding new ways to blur the lines between physical and digital play. That's what *Skylanders* is all about.

***Destiny*'s huge preorder numbers went a long way to justifying what has been hailed as the most expensive production in videogame history**



Do you think the vast majority of players really respond to innovation, though, or is it as much about simply buying another part of a series they're already familiar with?
I think it's a fair question. Innovation for innovation's sake almost never works; that's the road to novelty, and curiosities. I think you have to start with big ideas that are rooted in the desires of gamers, and so we have a great feedback loop with our players. We listen carefully to what's going on, and we watch how our games are being played. The innovations that we're bringing are ones that we think are meaningful improvements, either to new genres, or to existing franchises that we think gamers will respond to. Nobody was out there asking to bring toys to life, but we tested the heck out of it, we had a lot of kids play it, and we saw a universally great response. We did the same thing with *Destiny* – 4.6 million people played the beta. With *Call Of Duty*, the cry for innovation from most of our fans has been very consistent and this year I'm getting more questions like, 'How do you know you haven't changed it too much?' I think you'll know that when you hold the controller and feel it. It's a tough balance to strike, but I think we're striking it. ■

Daring minds

Abertay's ProtoPlay festival continues to grow as it showcases up-and-coming developers

Dundee is going through a period of aggressive regeneration. Demolition sites pock the landscape surrounding the city's historic centre, each scar encircled by temporary fencing and diversion signs. It's a suitably tumultuous backdrop for Dare ProtoPlay, Abertay University's celebration of new development talent and the UK's biggest indie game festival. The four-day August event, which hosted 15 student projects entered in the Dare To Be Digital competition as well as 30 indie devs' games, took place in the city's Caird Hall and adjoining City Square, and attracted over 13,000 attendees.

The lineup was led by former *Uncharted* designer Richard Lemarchand, now attached to the University Of Southern California, where he works as an associate professor. In a keynote titled Games And Players: Futures And Predictions, Lemarchand looked at the emerging technologies creating new opportunities for creators, explored some ideas for how such tech could be used, and examined who players – and creators – might be in the future.

Virtual reality featured heavily, tying in with Lemarchand's growing interest in "experiential games", such as *Among The Sleep* and *Fract OSC*. He considered the possibilities of reality hacking and creating presence via motion-capture technology, giving the example of Nonny De La Peña's sim of a Syrian refugee camp, which you can explore by walking around.

And he suggested that now is a good time to specialise for anyone looking at getting into the industry, specifically citing the increasing need for skilled animators, physics and AI programmers, designers and production specialists, and experts in simulated materials. But for small studios, whose members must be multidisciplinary, he held Capybara up as an exemplar of a studio willing to reinvent itself.

Lemarchand also hosted an expert panel, which took in such topics as how you go about fostering a development scene, learning from other disciplines and being prepared to divide your efforts between work-for-hire and original content. The panel included Quartic Llama programmer and game designer **Erin Michno**; Colin Anderson, founder and MD of Denki; PlayStationFirst head of academic development Maria Stukoff; Dr William Huber, who lectures in computer arts at Abertay University; and Clive Gillman, director of Dundee Contemporary Arts.

> The Dare ProtoPlay entries on show were an innovative bunch. There was a heavy focus on local multiplayer

"University was great, and I got to use all the tech I wouldn't normally have access to," said Michno, who believes that a lack of communal spaces for developers needs to be addressed. "But there's a gap when you leave. What do you do? Finding ways to fill those little gaps – and since there's so many of us making games, it would make sense to do that communally – that would really help foster the creative scene."

Anderson, meanwhile, paraphrased UB40's assertion that Top Of The Pops and unemployment benefit were the two key factors in invigorating the UK music scene. Developers, he continued, need the same kind of freedom to hone their craft without money or job worries, and cited Denki's own practice of taking staff off of work-for-hire projects periodically to let them experiment without stipulation.



The 15 student Dare teams exhibited their games to the public in a giant marquee set up in Dundee's centre



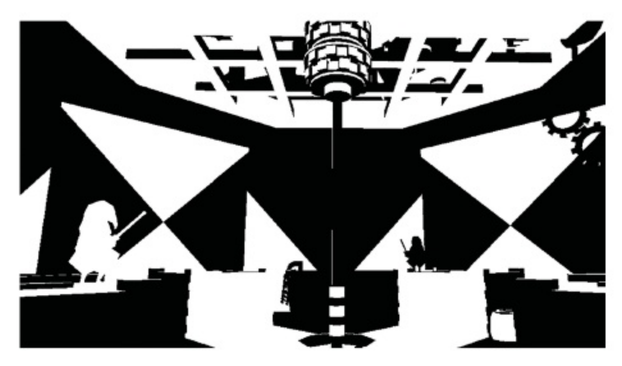
The University Of Southern California's Richard Lemarchand

Students have this luxury to at least some degree, and the Dare ProtoPlay entries on show were an innovative bunch. There was a heavy focus on local multiplayer projects, including single-screen brawler *Ally*, asymmetric action platformer *Don't Walk: Run* and the exquisitely executed *Chambara*. Sophia George, the V&A's first game designer in residence, was also at the event and showing the results of that partnership: a game called *Strawberry Thief*, which allows players to navigate and colour in William Morris prints using an iPad.

"Dare ProtoPlay is always a really exciting time for Dundee, as thousands of people of all ages come along to play new games," says **Chris Wilson**, Abertay University's communications manager and one of the team behind the festival. "ProtoPlay is a really important catalyst for young children starting to design games, but also for older children thinking about career choices and university, for students wanting to break into the industry, for indies to test games on a huge audience, and for anyone just interested in finding out more about the world of games. It's something the whole team at Abertay is extremely proud of." ■

PROTO HYPE

Six of our picks from the student and indie games on show at this year's Dare ProtoPlay



CHAMBARA OVERLY KINETIC

Chambara pits two teams of two samurai against each other, each armed with only a sword and a dash move. Levels are split up into contrasting colours, as are the teams, so you're practically invisible when in areas that match your team's own hue. The result is a fantastically tense firstperson stealth hunt that's punctuated by intense bursts of panicked action.



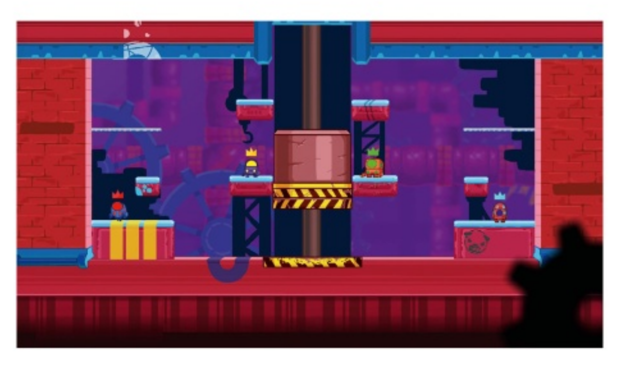
DON'T WALK: RUN TORQUE

In Torque's take on cinematic gaming, four players must run the gauntlet through themed film sets while a fifth player triggers all manner of obstacles and pyrotechnics using a tablet. Anti-gravity, exploding barrels and the ability to fling cars at will encourage some sadistic behaviour from the director, while players on set can attack each other for additional points.



MUTINY HIDDEN ARMADA

Mutiny's chunky art style and dynamic stages instantly bring Capcom's *Power Stone* to mind, but Hidden Armada's game is a co-operative battle in which you must defend your ship from invading pirates, patch up any damage, and avoid sharks if you tumble off the deck. A captain's hat grants additional loot to its wearer, but your crew can attack you to claim it if your reputation is low.



ALLY UNORTHOBOX

Offering a new twist on the singlescreen brawler, *Ally* complicates the fight by allowing you to forcibly recruit other players to your side. Each player starts with their own colour, and can hurl projectiles. If you hit someone, they'll be stunned for a short time. Jump on their head and they'll become your colour and have to fight alongside you. It's hectic, duplicitous stuff.



SEEK FIVE PIXELS

Inspired by childhood games of hide and seek, and gyroscopically viewed using a phone, Five Pixels' *Seek* puts you in control of five different children, each with a novel way of seeing the world. One might be able to discern hidden bridges, for example, while another can follow sparkling trails of light. Each new clue leads you to the next child, and eventually to the level's exit.



DUALITY BASEMENT RAPTORS

A simple shooter, *Duality* tasks you with navigating its enemy-infested levels while collecting as many gems as possible. Enemies and missiles come in two colours, however, and you can switch between tones yourself, rendering your ship invulnerable to one or the other. It comes off as a blend of *PixelJunk Shooter* and *Ikaruga*, with a focus on fast, smooth piloting under pressure.

Odd happenings

Lorne Lanning on finding new ways to play, and the future of his company's famed series

With *New 'N' Tasty* now well beyond the factory gates and out into the wilds, publisher Oddworld Inhabitants is taking a breather while it considers its next move. The obvious choice, and one that the *Oddworld* series' extremely loyal fans are also hoping for, would be to give *Oddworld: Abe's Exoddus* the *New 'N' Tasty* treatment, but co-founder and COO Lorne Lanning is thinking further ahead, too.

"If we sell 250,000 copies of *New 'N' Tasty*, then we could get into *Exodus*," he tells us. "But selling 500,000 would really allow us to look at new IP." Exactly what form that new IP would take is undecided at this stage, however. Although the signs are positive, Lanning is remaining cautiously optimistic as to whether a third *Oddworld* platformer, built from scratch or otherwise, would find an audience after the amount of time it would take to reach completion. But commercial considerations aside, the designer in Lanning doesn't relish the prospect of building more of the same when there are other options to explore.

"The truth is that where my heart is at right now is in new mechanics," he explains. "I've actually designed quite a bit of *Fangus* [AKA *Oddworld: The Brutal Ballad Of Fangus Klot*], and it's very different. It's a 3D world, but I want more procedural world generation and higher resolutions, and I don't think that stuff is quite right yet. Beyond that, I would definitely want natural-motion animation capabilities and physics, so that we really take that sense of life to another level."

Lanning, chuckling to himself, describes *Fangus* as an intense blend of Man On Fire and Old Yeller, but admits that despite its fairly advanced state there's still a great deal of expensive experimentation needed to figure out how to make the game's mechanics (which he won't be drawn on) sit well together. "When I look at *Oddworld*, what excites me most is those new property possibilities," he says. "But they're huge efforts to do. When it comes to the 2D stuff, it will be interesting to see how *Alf's Escape* [DLC in which you rescue the 300th Mudokon] does. It's probably one of the deepest levels in the game, and we really wanted to make it special because, like anything we do, we want the audience to appreciate the quality we put into it even if it's not that huge a play."

"As I got more demos on Oculus and Morpheus, I realised just how game-changing this is going to be"

If it goes down well, Lanning muses, the *Oddworld* series – at least, the 2D games within it – could adopt a more episodic release strategy. "Instead of having to spend $2 million to get the next one out and take however long," he says, "in three to six months we might be able to offer two or three more levels of a slightly different story. If that could work, it would give us a shorter time to market possibility that we haven't really had on the property before."

Given that there is so much goodwill towards the *Oddworld* series from a highly involved fanbase – Oddworld Inhabitants canvassed players to ask what project they would like to see before work started on *New 'N' Tasty* – Kickstarter would seem to be a particularly good fit. It would not only help to raise the capital needed to build *Oddworld*'s trademark lavish worlds and cinematics, but also further strengthen the link between its creators and the community. Lanning appreciates the potential advantages, but has misgivings about systemic problems with the crowdfunding model.

"There's a game that's being played with crowdfunding," he says. " I don't mean this in a negative context, but we have to acknowledge it: you always ask for less than you need. If you're asking for $2 million, no one's going to donate. So you have to figure out how you would deliver something at your low capture. If you have all the archived assets like we do, if you have good relationships and a passionate team like Just Add Water, you could do it for a couple of million – which is what *New 'N' Tasty* cost. But it's still a couple of million. But if we only asked for $600,000, and we raise that, we've still got to deliver. I don't feel comfortable asking for an amount of money that I can't actually do something with."

Crowdfunding an entirely new project, nothing to do with *Oddworld*, is still an appealing prospect for Lanning, however, and recent technological developments have inspired him. "Right now my primary interest is in VR," he says. "I've been watching this stuff closely since the '80s… as I got more demos on Oculus and Morpheus, I realised exactly how game-changing this is going to be. And as a designer, I got really excited about the possibility of using that in ways that I think can be ahead of the curve.

"I'm not thinking of *Oddworld* as a property for VR right away because I don't want to try to fit square pegs in round holes; I want to approach the design medium purely for what the devices are best at. I just purely want to look at solving [the challenges of] those new devices in a great way." ■



Oddworld co-founder and COO Lorne Lanning

KICK OFF

"[Kickstarter] needs to clean up its software because the back end is terrible," Lanning tells us when we ask if he has any other issues with crowdfunding. "Almost everyone who is getting into crowdfunding realises too late that they're signing up to devote most of their energy to becoming a physical goods distribution company. They promise T-shirts, hats and all this stuff, but Kickstarter isn't capturing the shipping information from the people who've invested in those tiers. A lot of people use a separate email address for purchases, so now you've taken someone's money, but you don't really have a way to communicate with them. So while I find Kickstarter an interesting model, for a Silicon Valley booming web 3.0 company, I think it should fix the damn software on the back-end and listen to the complaints that virtually every one of their successful campaigns has had."



A brand-new *Oddworld* game is still some way off, but Lanning has plenty of ideas ready to go – including ***The Brutal Ballad Of Fangus Klot***, pictured here – if *New 'N' Tasty* and a possible *Exoddus* remake prove successful

EXPLODE INTO LIFE

Black Tusk's weapons expert branches out

Stuart Maxwell's day job involves creating visual effects at Microsoft's Black Tusk Studios, which has taken up the reins of the *Gears Of War* series. But constant exposure to explosions, weaponry and war zones has pushed his personal project, *Shape Of The World*, in a very different direction.

"For seven years now, I've been blowing things up in triple-A games," Maxwell tells us. "I've been dying to build a game where things just *grow*. It's nice to come home and build up a world that doesn't want to kill you!

"I've been watching truly stylised and beautiful games slowly emerge onto the scene, with legends like *Flower* and *Limbo* making a statement that's been resonating with me for a long time."

In PC game *Shape Of The World*, which Maxwell is working on alongside creature designer Athomas Goldberg and audio designer Brent Silk, you explore a world made up of distinct regions. Each step you take grows the surreal land's flora around you. You will also encounter a variety of indigenous lifeforms along the way, as well as different weather and times of day.

"[The game] is designed to encourage the player to explore and get a little disoriented," Maxwell says. "Since the forest only grows when you enter it, you can't see where you're going in advance. There's always a surprise ready to pop up in front of you." ■



The minimalist art style has been inspired by Maxwell's interest in commercial motion graphics as well as the colour and silhouette works of movie animation production designer Hans Bacher

Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls


AP/Press Association

"I play a lot of *Football Manager*... I spent a month playing as Swansea... The game helped me learn a lot about each of my teammates' characteristics."

New Swansea signing **Bafétimbi Gomis** has a rare approach to scouting



"The idea of a shooter is running around with weapons, in firstperson, blowing things away. But what are you really doing? **Who are you, and what do you care about?"**

Doom maker **John Romero** mulls over FPSes. If only we could *talk* to these creatures


AP/Press Association

"It's not a sport. It's a competition. Chess is a competition. Checkers is a competition. Mostly, I'm interested in doing real sports."

ESPN president **John Skipper** dismisses eSports as a pursuit deserving of his viewers' attention. Meanwhile on ESPN: Bass Pro Fishing

"'Are you out of your fucking skull? Do you know who I am? I'm a high-energy physicist. I'm a jazz musician and a game designer. I have no business being there. Fuck off.'"



Seamus Blackley recalls his reaction to the offer of becoming a Hollywood agent

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game *E-Deru Sunaba*
Manufacturer Sega

'Sandbox' is an overused term in videogames, but Sega's new arcade cabinet can't really be described as anything else. *E-Deru Sunaba* (which roughly translates to, 'the sandbox where a picture appears') allows players to mould real sand in a pit. The cabinet then uses dynamic projection mapping to overlay colourful graphics onto the changing topography and the surrounding area.

If you dig down to the base of the sand pit, for example, you'll expose water filled with virtual fish. Landmasses will grow flowers and grass, or become rocky if built high enough. The seasons will change as you play, shifting colours and bringing with them a variety of insects that scurry across the playspace, and even onto the hands and arms of players, who should react with a mixture of delight and terror.

The sand itself is an odd consistency that moves with the mouldable viscosity of diluted Play-Doh when compressed, but crumbles when broken apart. While it's a charming idea, machines will presumably need to be monitored closely by arcades if they hope to have any chance of keeping their stock of Sega sand where it's meant to be. And while mucking about with insects is amusing, the tech is crying out for a port of *Populus* or *From Dust*.



My Favourite Game
Jack Bevan

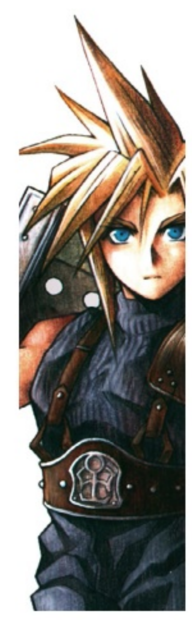
The Foals drummer on finding time to play between albums, murderous sprees, and his long love affair with *Final Fantasy VII*

Jack Bevan is the drummer for Oxford five-piece Foals. The band has released three albums, with 2013's Holy Fire reaching number two in the UK charts. The album was nominated for the Mercury Prize, as was 2010's second LP, Total Life Forever. Here, Bevan tells us about his gaming journey to date, from *Sonic 2* to *Assassin's Creed IV*.

You picked up a PlayStation 4 earlier this year. Why Sony's console and not a Wii U or an Xbox One?
I've always been on the PlayStation side of things. I got the first PlayStation in 1997; at the time the competition was the Sega Saturn, and there was nothing on that which particularly appealed to me. Then I upgraded to the PS2, and then PS3, as a matter of course. I think that the PS4 looks really great – it's probably the most aesthetically appealing console yet.

Was getting a PlayStation your first experience of videogames?
No, I had a Mega Drive II – I got it for Christmas when I was seven, I think. That came with *Sonic The Hedgehog 2*, and that was my first gaming experience. I loved the *Sonic* series, and how weird and twisted *Earthworm Jim* was. I have an older cousin, and he's always been on top of technology. He got a PlayStation before me, and I got to play *Crash Bandicoot* on it. I must have been about ten years old. To be able to play something in 3D, at the time it felt like it had the most incredible, beautiful graphics. I thought I was in this other world.

A BAND CALLED HORSE
Bevan first made waves on the music scene as a member of The Edmund Fitzgerald, alongside eventual Foals frontman Yannis Philippakis. That trio splintered in 2005, and Bevan and Philippakis went on to shape the Foals lineup with fellow Oxford musicians Jimmy Smith, Walter Gervers and Edwin Congreave. Foals headlined Bestival in the summer, and are currently working on their next album.



Which forthcoming games are you looking forward to playing?
I love open-world games, and I love games that use stealth. I'm a big *Elder Scrolls* fan, too, so I'll be getting the next one in that series. Right now I'm playing *Assassin's Creed IV*, when I get the chance. It looks great but I think it always takes developers a while to really get a handle on the new machines, so it'll be interesting to see what people are doing with the PS4 in the future.

Given all of your commitments with the band, is it difficult to find the time to properly immerse yourself in a game when it's built to the scale of *Black Flag*?
Well, we're actually either really busy or hardly busy at all. When we were writing Holy Fire, I actually had downtime enough to play through *Skyrim*, *Uncharted 3* and *Portal 2*. I have other games that I dip into for shorter sessions. *Skyrim* is like a movie – I'm going to spend hours in front of it in one sitting. But something like *Grand Theft Auto V*, I can turn that on and just run around murdering people for half an hour. I'm looking forward to the PS4 port because I foolishly gave away my PS3 when I upgraded.

> "When I got FFVII I didn't have a memory card, so I left my PlayStation switched on for about two months"

The *Grand Theft Auto* games are renowned for their soundtracks – have you ever contributed to games? Would you like to create an entire game soundtrack at some point, even?
We've licensed some tracks before, to *FIFA* a couple of times, and I think there might have been a racing game too. So far as doing a game soundtrack goes, I think we'd love to if we had the time. We've always talked about how exciting it would be to soundtrack a film, but that extends to a game too. Right now we're too busy – we write, we release a record, we tour, repeat. But maybe in a few years, when we've maybe slowed down a bit, there'll be a chance to do something like that.

Finally, what's your favourite game?
That's *Final Fantasy VII*, definitely. Whenever I hear of someone else loving that game, I feel I'll have a great connection with them. It's the first game I remember having a proper, emotionally engaging storyline. When I got it I didn't have a memory card, so I actually left my PlayStation on for about two months. My biggest fear was that there'd be a power cut. Honestly, at the time, the idea of losing my progress was on a par with losing a family pet. When I did get a memory card, I sunk so many hours into that game. It felt amazingly open. The game generated a community at school; we'd talk to each other about our achievements. We'd talk about beating Emerald Weapon. Of course, none of us actually had – that was insanely difficult. When Aeris died, I was absolutely devastated. I've played it so many times, but I think it's one of the best games of all time. ■



Bevan (second from right) started out with Sega's Mega Drive before picking up a PlayStation in 1997. Since then, it's been Sony consoles all the way

WEBSITE

GamePhobias
bit.ly/vgphobia

It may look like it was made by a GCSE student in 1994, but GamePhobias is bang up to date, a reflection of the ever-increasing breadth of subject matter in games and the way ever-greater production values can trigger real-life phobias. Created after Andrew Rasmussen's frustrating search for a spider-free RPG for his arachnophobic wife, this is a searchable database of games for their potential triggers. Rasmussen and co-creator Paul Mayfield understand that context matters little where phobias are concerned, so if a game features a ghost in any capacity, it's going on that list. It's why *BioShock Infinite* gets listed under Disruptive Home Life, and *Mega Man X* is filed under Existential Despair. It's a noble cause, but an enormous undertaking, which is why its creators are seeking assistance for both research and funding.



VIDEO

Diggin' In The Carts
bit.ly/digcart

The Red Bull Music Academy is a five-week-long series of workshops and festivals that's held in a different major city every year. Ahead of this year's programme in Tokyo, which starts in mid-October, the energy-drink maker has produced this five-part look at the history of Japanese game music. Contemporary artists such as Anamanaguchi and Flying Lotus appear, but the focus is squarely on legends such as Junko Ozawa and Hirokazu Tanaka, who spend the first episode reminiscing about the days when game music was made not with computers, but soldering irons and graph paper.

WEB GAME

On The Edge Of Earth: 5000
bit.ly/earth5000

This short entry for Ludum Dare 30's 48-hour competition conjures up pangs of nostalgia for Sierra's first *Space Quest*. While the keyboard-controlled game is more of a mechanical puzzle than a point-and-click, there's some of the genre's spirit here. You control the sole crew member of Station 103B, a terraforming mission sent to create new habitable planets. Despite its small size, the station is packed with gadgets and indecipherable terminals, which you must figure out how to use in order to fire a Genesis missile at the rocky planet visible in the distance. In order to do this, you'll have to work out how far you are from the planet, complete a space walk to load the missile, and aim the launcher in the right direction. Or you could turn up the ship's stereo, kick back and enjoy the solitude.



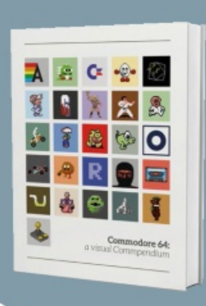
THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

BOOK

Commodore 64: A Visual Commpendium
www.bitmapbooks.co.uk

This Kickstarter-funded love letter to Commodore's 8bit micro is a beautifully produced but dotty curio. The 232 pages of pixel-porn images from the machine's huge software catalogue fly by, scattered with snappy quotes from talents of the day and bolstered with an assortment of paintings from Oliver Frey. But beyond the nostalgia fix, the editorial bagginess of the project holds it back. The copy can be short on insight (*Hyper Sports* was "a bit of a joystick killer"), asset choices are sometimes questionable (the *Kikstart* loading screen?), and while Frey's artwork was often great, it can feel incongruous between the necessarily minimalist screen dumps. Hopefully the Amiga-focused followup will have a sharper edge.



continue

Child of *Destiny*
Our ongoing *Destiny* review has led to some uncommonly early nights for the **Edge** brood

Heebie-*PTs*
After *PT*, of course, we may never sleep again

Nintendo 64 time
Rmuk Apps gives Motorola's Moto 360 a *GoldenEye* interface

Kind of a big deal
Will Ferrell playing games for a good cause goes down smooth

quit

Solid snake brigade
MGSV's new Quiet clip feels sleazy, despite Kojima's promised twist on her sexualised look

Out in the cold
The Outsider succumbs to the curse of **Edge**

Never alone
Alone In The Dark: Illumination introduces co-op. About that name…

Old Nintendo 3DS
New-look bundles for old hardware only confuse after a platform refresh

TWEETS

I wish I could go back and tell teenage me I'd one day share an @edgeonline cover with Mr. Miyamoto. Many emotions!
Jonathan Burroughs @HiFiHair
Designer, Virginia

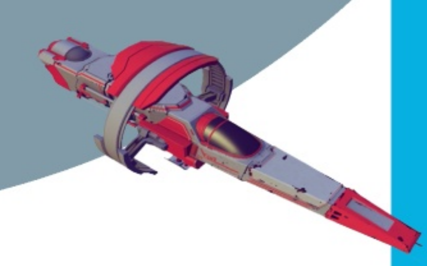
So an Apple employee, a FB programmer and a MS programmer walk into a bar and Dr. Dre asks Carmack, who's that bearded guy with the fedora?
Ivan-Assen Ivanov @ivanassen
Technical director, Haemimont Games

Sometimes I look at children, and think 'you'll never edit an autoexec.bat or config.sys', and my heart breaks
Sean Murray @NoMansSky
Hello Games founder

For those asking about my racist eyebrows: the game currently generates the same eyebrows regardless of race, and can sometimes look odd.
Dan Marshall @danthat
Developer, Ben There, Dan That



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MONTE CARLO



HAWKMOON

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AURORA LANCE



CRYPT HAMMER

OUTRAGEOUS FORTUNE

OUT NOW





DISPATCHES NOVEMBER



Issue 271

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins either a SteelSeries Wireless H Headset, or an Apex keyboard and Sensei Wireless laser mouse









Salve to the remaster

One recent talking point in the gaming community centres on 'remastered' versions of games taken from last-gen consoles. In typical fashion, Internet comment sections have been awash with abuse and cries of 'Cash grab!' However, after picking up *Tomb Raider: Definitive Edition*, I thought I would write in to express my thoughts on the matter.

I should make it clear from the outset that I have never been a fan of the *Tomb Raider* series. I played the first one many years ago, and for some reason it just never held any appeal. Therefore, when the latest reboot entry to the series was released, I paid it little attention, despite the overwhelmingly positive reception it received – in any case, I was far too busy with university work to invest time in another game. However, a relatively slow summer has meant that I've been eating through games on my Xbox One at a brisk pace, and given the positive review scores of Lara's latest adventure along with the prospect of a more complete package, I picked up a cheaper, secondhand copy and sunk my teeth in.

> "Those who don't know the breadth of the medium aren't going to ask for a greater variety of games"

What a superb game. Crystal Dynamics has certainly found a new fan, and I will be more than willing to part with my cash immediately when the sequel is released – an outcome that would never have occurred were it not for the remastered package.

Musicians release such packages all the time and even though I tend to already own the original works, I'll buy the remastered versions, which, nine times out of ten, sound better. I don't see such re-releases as cash grabs, but instead as improving upon existing works for benefit of the fans, while also bringing the joy of those works to a new audience.

So, contrary to popular opinion, I'd like to openly thank Crystal Dynamics for putting in the time and effort to improve an already stellar game for the benefit of those who didn't get a chance to play it on 360/PS3, and to express my optimism regarding the new *Sleeping Dogs* and *Metro 2033* packages. Now, where is my ...And Justice For All remaster?

Jonathan Benjamin

There's a big difference between a digital remaster of a 40-year-old analogue audio recording and a touch-up of a game that's not even a year old. Still, *Tomb Raider* and its ilk have helped fill out a quiet year on new console hardware. And if we're talking remaster fantasies, we'll have *Super Mario Galaxy Collection HD*, please.

Price downers

I just read the letter in **E**271 from Adnan in relation to the price to import games from other countries and why preorders are down, and it got me thinking. If Microsoft wanted us to go all-digital and had stuck to its guns with the original plans for Xbox One, then could we have been in for cheaper games? If we had the online check-in, then that could greatly reduce the impact of piracy on the system, which would only be a good thing. However, how would it have affected retail outlets if we all started buying games digitally, and should we care?

Take *Diablo III*, just released on Xbox One and PS4. I checked around for the best deal and found that it's generally around £44.99 for a disc-based standard edition from retailers such as Amazon, Simply Games and so on. I decided to check www.game.co.uk and they listed their price as £44.99. So I ventured into my local Game store and they have it priced up at £54.99! I can understand it being a little more to cover store expenses, but £10 is excessive.

Worse, the Microsoft store has it for £59.99 for the digital download edition. The


www.facebook.com/edgeonline
Discuss gaming topics with fellow **Edge** readers

price disparity is a disgrace. Game has learnt nothing from why it went bust previously, and it's surely only a matter of time before it heads in that direction a second time. Microsoft/Blizzard are clearly having a laugh pricing this at £59.99 for the piracy-free, no-trade-in version of the game.

Why would anyone preorder at £59.99 or in store at £54.99 when they can import or even just buy from the Microsoft USA/Hong Kong store for a fraction of the price (£22.99 on HK!)? Eric Hirshberg, this is your answer as to why preorders are down, and that's before taking into account the quality or frequency of a series.
Tony Kenny

It's unlikely Microsoft's digital dream would have brought prices down, unfortunately. That's the preserve of competition – which is why online retailers are cheaper than the high street chains, and why PC gaming can be so affordable – but those prices will come down as the generation progresses.

Changing ways

I have no doubt that anyone reading this is knowledgeable about games. Consider *Gone Home*, *Papers, Please* and *Journey*. You know the small teams (or perhaps just one person) who made them, that they gained critical and commercial success, and what they're about – even if you've never played them. But some people don't know any of this, and it concerns me.

Clearly everyone has different levels of interest in the medium, but those who don't know the breadth of it aren't going to ask for a greater variety of games – something we most definitely need.

In an ideal world, the announcement of *No Man's Sky* wouldn't have caused so much hype. We would have been exposed to infinite worlds before; exposed to games where developers trusted players to think for themselves, and games with which publishers were willing to take risks. The fact that it generated massive hype goes to show how repetitive gaming content over the past decade has become, and how accustomed we've become to it.

And there's another concern. Recently several of my fellow PC gamers have expressed their disdain for consoles. In a particularly amusing case, after asking someone why he hadn't played *The Last Of Us*, he responded, "Well, if you're happy to pay exorbitant amounts for sub-par graphics, then go ahead."

Consumers of other media don't choose to skip works because of the format they're presented in, so why does it happen in games? I have the feeling it goes deeper than price; that for many, illogical choices are justified by adherence to some bogus elitism. Maybe it's the existence of video walkthroughs and the chance to experience a game without needing to buy it or the necessary hardware. (Although it puzzles me how people think the experience they get out of watching someone else play isn't too different to playing it themselves – even though one is lacking interactivity, the defining feature of games.)

Whatever the reason, one can only hope that in the future people enquiring into gaming don't come away thinking our community is obsessed with shooters and high-quality graphics. The success of the games highlighted in your New Horizons feature is reassurance enough for me that we're heading in the right direction. I'm also psyched for the forthcoming wave of space games. I hope those that offer and encourage exploration – those that assume players are intelligent and able to make their own fun – do well, and that other companies take cues from them. Games from small studios have been doing it for a while. It's about time triple-A developers did the same.
Benjamin Thompson

The disparity in marketing budgets means the big boys will always get the most attention from those with only a passing interest in games, but don't give up hope just yet. That *No Man's Sky* can stand out among aggressively marketed blockbusters is a sign that change is coming, if not already happening. In the meantime, let us know whether you'd like a SteelSeries headset or a keyboard/mouse combo.

Trigger warning

With the announcement of Sony Morpheus and the extra investment of Oculus Rift, it appears the holy grail of VR is edging closer. To predict what gaming milestones may come from this is impossible, but if VR fulfils its designed potential, then certain genres may be left behind. The end goal of VR is to present worlds that fully encompass and consume the viewer, the screen dissolving before their eyes as virtual and physical worlds collide and the body believes that it has entered these worlds. What impact will this have on what we play?

If the experience of playing a videogame becomes so real, so believable, what is the pleasure in playing a military game? The pastime of mindlessly massacring simulated soldiers in the name of war is already dubious, but when this experience becomes simulated to the level of reality, what then? Not only will the morals of the experience be questioned further but the psychological effects on the player also. Will it be healthy to enter these worlds? What if the body responds to them as if they were real, the likes of *Call Of Duty* therefore causing post-traumatic stress?

The glistening horizon that is VR should cause huge excitement but it should also force us contemplate what we play and whether certain genres should be left as just a game and not a simulation.
Henry Driver

War may be more immersive in VR, but until those bullets can actually harm you and your friends, the risk of lasting psychological damage is at least reduced. Of that sort, anyway – *Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z* still manages to haunt our dreams. ■



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

When analysing the range of action available to the player of a videogame, analysts sometimes talk about the 'verbs'. Walk, run, crouch, shoot, hijack car, hack CCTV camera – these are all familiar verbs in videogames, which just means that if you manipulate a control in a certain way, your onscreen avatar or perspectival point will shift in a certain way, or something else will happen in the gameworld. Less common verbs in games are shudder, caress, kneel or daydream.

To remark on the paucity of common verbs is one way to point out the amazingly stunted simulation of human experience in most of today's videogames, even or especially those that aspire to be the most mature or cinematic. What happens in them is that vaguely recognisable human interactions happen in cutscenes, and then one is thrown back into playing with the ordinary handful of verbs available to the kind of supposedly charismatic psychopath who counts as a hero.

To speak of player 'verbs' in a videogame is, of course, a metaphor. Verbs are parts of language, not of behaviour, virtual or otherwise. So it is salutory to be reminded of the possibility that the menu of verbs could be far longer and richer in the kind of game built with words rather than polygons. The poet John Redmond makes this implicit point in his remarkable long poem from 2008, MUDe. It takes the form of a fictional transcript of several MUD sessions.

Often the player in the poem types in ordinary commands such as 'look' or 'drink'. But in one interaction between user and system Redmond makes a subtle general joke about player verbs: '›ack / You ack'. What does it mean to ack? Perhaps the player means to say 'ack' in an expression of annoyance or disgust. But we can't be sure, and we are given no indication whether the system understands the verb 'ack', or whether it is just parroting it back to the player. The point may be that it doesn't really matter, as long as the player feels that successful expression has occurred.



Illustration marshdavies.com

Word-built games will always do interiority better than visual games, in the same way that novels do it better than cinema

This 'ack' is evidently the kind of verb that one cannot imagine being assigned to a joypad button in an open-world city-based murder simulator. Similarly impossible to build in such a game would be the eerie and disturbing sequence in MUDe in which the player meets Death. "Your mouth is forced open as wide as it can go. Then wider. Death tumbles inside with his six wet arms." One could watch this happening to a player avatar on a screen, but it wouldn't be happening to *you*.

Redmond's poem is not merely an assertion of the power of language to get at you where you live, so to speak, although in a subsequent explanatory note the poet does riff on some of the properties of language, and particularly verbs, that make a word-built world so flexible. "MUDs attract special kinds of language use," he explains. "One example is the so-called 'emote'. An emote occurs when a player demonstrates an emotion theatrically rather than merely reporting it. So, for example, a player who is feeling chirpy might type 'bounce'. The other players in the same room will then read 'John bounces around' instead of 'John says: I am excited'." In MUDs, then, language is often performative, in the terms of philosopher JL Austin: words do things.

The point is not that word-built games are simply superior, although it is likely that they will always do interiority better (Death climbing into you) than visual games, in the same way that novels do interiority better than cinema. But perhaps the fact that the text adventure is again resurgent (under the rubric of Interactive Fiction) bespeaks a dissatisfaction with the verbs available in mainstream videogames. In *Watch Dogs*, for example, it is literally impossible to sit down on a park bench. And after a few sleep cycles in my scummy hideout I seriously wanted to brush my teeth.

It would of course be much more work to build many such apparently trivial possibilities of action into videogames that are already extremely complicated. But the danger is that as long as players are limited to not much more than movement and condescendingly contextual action-button pushes, they will never really feel that the person representing them in the gameworld is a human being. Instead, that figure will remain a remote-controlled android, somehow mutely saddened by its own embarrassingly poor vocabulary of verbs.

Steven Poole's Trigger Happy 2.0 is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net



IAN BOGOST

Difficulty Switch

Hard game criticism

Are eSports – the competitive, spectator versions of games like *StarCraft* and *Street Fighter* – really sports? What does it even mean to ask such a question? For years, eSports were largely niche activities compared to traditional sports. But newly popular competitive games like *League Of Legends* and *Dota 2* seem to have made eSports mainstream. In an hour, 10,000 tickets were sold for *Dota 2*'s 2014 championship event, The International, and over 20 million people reportedly watched the competition online.

These numbers still pale in comparison with the most popular traditional sports, though. Roughly 60,000 people attended each of this year's FIFA World Cup semi-final matches in Brazil, which took place the same week as The International. And it is estimated that 1 billion TV viewers watched the final match a week later. In comparison, *Dota 2* looks like a community picnic.

So can eSports fandom overlap with traditional sports fandom? The answer seems obvious – of course it can! – just as football fans can also be tennis fans, or *Legend Of Zelda* fans can also be *Dark Souls* fans. And it's true that as individuals we seem able to make time for many different avocations, from videogaming to racquetball to knitting.

But things are more complicated when we ponder sport on a cultural scale. In Offside: Soccer And American Exceptionalism, Andrei S Markovits and Steven L Hellerman offer the concept of a 'sport space', a nickname for the capacity for sports that a culture can handle at a time. Timing turns out to matter a great deal in the establishment of a sports space. And it turns out that the most broadly popular modern sports like football, cricket, baseball and hockey arose, popularised and modernised during and just after the Victorian era. During the period between 1870 and 1930, conditions were perfect for filling nations' sports spaces.

Why? This was the industrialisation era, when leisure time first became widely available to broad swathes of the population rather than just the upper classes. Industrialisation also rapidly modernised societies, so that sports like football and baseball became engrained as cultural habits, for players and spectators alike. And the Victorian era overlapped with the colonial era, and newly central sports were exported from industrial Europe and imposed into the social fabric of their global colonies.

Markovits and Hellerman argue that once a handful of sports become broadly central to a society, the sports space becomes full. Not only does it become hard to add new sports, it also becomes difficult to unseat old ones. And as time wears on, a society's loyalty to its most broadly accepted sports only entrenches the sports space more deeply. New sports sometimes do arise; extreme sports offer one example. But windsurfing and mountain biking are just as niche as eSports – avocations rather than cultural bedrocks.



At best, StarCraft and LOL will probably share the fate of jai alai and motocross. Hardly the conquest of button over ball

Given videogames' historical, if stereotypical, reputation as an activity for the unathletic, the idea of eSports overtaking traditional sport represents an earned victory of the mind over the body. But if one follows Markovits' and Hellerman's argument to its logical conclusion, new sports may not even be possible after industrialism. At best, *StarCraft* and *LOL* will probably share the same fate as jai alai and motocross. Not a bad lot, but hardly the conquest of button over ball that some gamers assume.

We can take comfort in the fact that even if eSports can't compete with sports like soccer, few other activities could do so either. So, instead of thinking of eSports as a replacement for sport, perhaps it's better to understand them via another cultural metaphor. *StarCraft* developer Blizzard chooses spectatorship. The company's senior manager of eSports, Kim Phan, has argued that a "true eSport is one that is made for and enjoyed by a spectating audience".

But even with Blizzard and Valve investing heavily in making their competitive games legible and enjoyable to watch when played in arenas and over broadband streams, it's possible that the eSports moniker may confuse more than it clarifies. It's less important for eSports to be construed as sports than it is for them to find and maintain audiences of devoted fans and participants who can improve their commitment to the activity over time. Concerts are also spectator affairs, but Lady Gaga isn't trying to persuade anyone that her live performances count as 'musicsport'.

Ian Bogost is an author and game designer. His award-winning A Slow Year is available at www.bit.ly/1eQalad

Illustration **marshdavies.com**



NATHAN BROWN

Big Picture Mode

Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

What kind of person you'd have to be to see carrying out a DDOS attack as a good way to spend your day, let alone one of the final weekends of the summer, I just can't imagine. PSN was brought to its knees recently by either an individual named FamedGod or a group called Lizard Squad, purportedly to illustrate the holes in Sony's security; whoever it was should probably open the curtains and have a stern word with themselves about what they're doing with their lives. Yet the sorry episode, which culminated with Lizard Squad tweeting bomb threats to get Sony Online Entertainment president John Smedley's flight diverted, grounded and searched, was a reminder that for all the progress Sony has made with the design and marketing of PS4, its online service is still rooted in the past.

I heard once that the reason Sony is so slow to update the PlayStation Store with new releases every week is that the entire store has to be rebuilt when something is added to it. That sounds crazy, yet seems entirely plausible given how late in the day new games become available. I'd assumed that the late-2012 redesign, built in HTML5, was part of a wider effort to fix that, but if anything it's getting worse.

And while it's easy to decry the basement-dwelling script kiddies bringing down corporate servers for giggles, it's not something Sony needs much help with. When PSN isn't being targeted by hacking groups, it's being taken down for what Sony calls 'scheduled maintenance', as if the fact that it has been planned in advance somehow makes it OK to deprive paying customers of online multiplayer as well as many of PS4's headline features.

And it's the fact that these are paying customers that's key. What was lamentable on PS3, when online multiplayer was free, is deplorable now that a PlayStation Plus subscription is as central to your PS4 experience as Xbox Live was to 360. It's supposedly why hackers opted against going outside and instead stayed in to bring down PSN, showing that Sony wasn't spending the spoils of its subscription service on proper security. PlayStation Plus offers incredible value with free and discounted games, but players are still entitled to expect a robust online service for their £40 a year.



Illustration marshdavies.com

> While it's easy to decry script kiddies bringing down servers for giggles, it's not something Sony needs much help with

Sony's customer service problems don't end there, either: browse a few forums and you'll discover that Sony steadfastly refuses to budge on the 'no refunds' clause in its user agreement. It would not reimburse the fellow who used his DualShock 4 to play *Dark Souls II* on PS3, not realising that his powered-on PS4 was still accepting button presses. He bought £80 of games from the store, one of which he already owned on disc. Another's account was stolen and used to buy a couple of games; Sony recognised the account owner hadn't made the purchase, and took action against the person that did, but pointed to its Terms Of Service and refused a refund. If this is the digital revolution, you can keep it.

What gives me comfort in all this is that Sony has proven itself willing and able to recognise, apologise for and fix its mistakes. Ever since Kazuo Hirai, Shiro Kambe and Shinji Hasejima stood on a press conference stage in 2011 and bowed deeply in apology for the PSN hack, Sony has been on a mission to change itself and its image. It compensated players for the downtime with the Welcome Back programme, a selection of free games that quite clearly inspired PlayStation Plus. It heard loud and clear the complaints from creators that PS3 was a nightmare to work with, and made sure PS4 was more developer friendly. It then got its messaging pretty much perfect with a player-focused pitch that was a world apart from its early PS3 marketing, when Ken Kutaragi said you should get a second job to afford it.

I can see Sony's side of it: the making and marketing of its new console have obviously been its top priorities, network stability isn't really worth shouting about on an E3 stage, and ten million sales (plus a commanding lead over the competition) are validation enough of its decisions. But this latest console war is far from won; market share fluctuated wildly over the course of the previous generation, and this one will be no different. The messaging may have been right to date, but any good general will tell you propaganda only goes so far, and sooner or later you have to get around to the dirty work. If Sony doesn't start fixing things behind the scenes, before long it'll have much more than the occasional hacker to worry about.

Nathan Brown is ***Edge****'s deputy editor. Please reconnect your console to the Internet to restore byline services*

PLAYSTATION®4 GAMES CALENDAR 2014

YOUR GUIDE TO WHAT'S ON PS4.

OCTOBER

OCT 10



OCT 3	MIDDLE EARTH: SHADOW OF MORDOR
OCT 7	ALIEN: ISOLATION
OCT 10	DRIVECLUB
OCT 10	SKYLANDERS TRAP TEAM
OCT 10	NBA 2K15
OCT 17	THE EVIL WITHIN
OCT 24	JUST DANCE 2015
OCT 24	SAMURAI WARRIORS 4
OCT 28	ASSASSIN'S CREED: UNITY
OCT 31	WWE 2K15
OCT 31	LORDS OF THE FALLEN
OCT TBC	MINECRAFT PS4 EDITION

NOVEMBER

NOV 21



NOV 4	CALL OF DUTY: ADVANCED WARFARE
NOV 11	THE CREW
NOV 13	PRO EVOLUTION SOCCER 2015
NOV 14	LEGO BATMAN 3: BEYOND GOTHAM
NOV 18	FAR CRY 4
NOV 21	DRAGON AGE: INQUISITION
NOV 21	LITTLEBIGPLANET 3
NOV 21	PROJECT CARS

THIS IS FOR THE PLAYERS

#4ThePlayers

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- GRAND THEFT AUTO V
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TO FIND OUT MORE AND VIEW FUTURE RELEASES

PS4™

#272

HYPE

THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH



Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Hype content

This is for the players

www.edge-online.com
Up-to-the-minute
previews and reviews

Early adopters have it tough. They have to pay a premium for new hardware, be patient throughout all the teething problems and, worst of all, endure a sparse release schedule. It's over 40 years since the game console was invented, but old problems persist: day-one Xbox One buyers have been needlessly saddled with Kinect, PS4 players have had to make do with a diet of ports of PC indie games in between the odd exclusive, and Wii U owners have had to wait for Nintendo to adjust to the pitfalls of HD game development. Surely the smart thing to do is to give it a couple of years, to wait for the price to come down and the software library to fill out?

This month's Hype crop shows precisely why players are still prepared to put down their money on day one and accept the early adopter's lot. With Kinect gone, Nintendo refocusing its efforts on people who already play games, and Sony having done so from the start with PlayStation 4, all three platform holders are producing games for the sort of person who queues up at midnight to snare a big new release.

On PS4 it means *Bloodborne* (p36), the latest – in spirit if not name – in Hidetaka Miyazaki's punishingly challenging and uniquely rewarding *Souls* series. On Xbox One it means *Sunset Overdrive* (p40), a riotously colourful open-world shooter that recalls *Jet Set Radio*. And on both it means *Geometry Wars 3: Dimensions* (p48), a sequel to a beloved 360 launch title, a true early-adopter classic.

Which isn't to say that developers are pandering to the crowd; they're nudging it towards new things, too. With *Quantum Break* (p44), Remedy seeks to bridge the gap and also explore the common ground between games and live-action TV. With *Life Is Strange* (p46), Dontnod is finding out what happens to episodic narrative when the protagonist can rewind time. It's a rich, varied mix that shows why new hardware still appeals: early adopters may have it tough, but it's always worth it in the end.

MOST WANTED

Below PC, Xbox One
It's all gone dark of late on Capy's brooding, beautiful roguelike-like, but that suits its nature perfectly. Each wanderer in these painterly deeps will be pushing into the unknown. Strange beasts await, but the focus is not on combat, it's on exploring *Below*'s unseen depths.

DriveClub PS4
With each new promo, *DriveClub* looks better and better. The upgraded weather looks astonishing, the game flirting with photorealism when the right combination of time of day and rain come together. We may have to wait a while after launch for the weather update, but Evolution seems to be cooking up a storm.

GTAV PC, PS4, Xbox One
We aren't often enthused by the prospect of more traffic on the roads, but in the context of *GTAV* upgrades we'll make an exception. In the skies, meanwhile, trying to take in the improved draw distance from a Dodo should be fun.



BLOODBORNE

Shining some light into Yharnam's obfuscating darkness

Publisher SCE
Developer FromSoftware, Japan Studio
Format PS4
Origin Japan
Release February 5, 2015 (JP), others TBC



Masaaki Yamagiwa, producer, Japan Studio

At Gamescom in August, Sony producer **Masaaki Yamagiwa** did his utmost to paint *Bloodborne* as a bold new IP for PlayStation 4, with its transforming weapons, off-hand shotgun and Van Helsing-esque Gothic setting. Despite all that, however, the lineage that bore it is plainly obvious. But while Hidetaka Miyazaki's fourth game in the *Souls* spiritual family may not be totally novel, it is nonetheless bold: it's taking to task the way that players approach combat.

Wearing the thickest armour you can find and equipping the tallest greatshield you can hold isn't the most fun way to fight, but it's safe. Safer, at least, than going into combat without a shield, which is how Miyazaki insists players play *Bloodborne*. "When we looked at perilous combat, we thought about what kind of things we can offer to the player," Yamagiwa says. "*Demon's Souls* was a game that was extremely challenging, and we've kept that intact, but if we increase it too far from what it was back in *Demon's Souls*, you make the game pretty much impossible. So we needed different pillars."

Those new 'pillars' are *Bloodborne*'s Regain system and off-hand blunderbuss. The former simply means that health lost can be reclaimed by striking back immediately after taking a hit, giving the game a more aggressive forward momentum and forcing you to push into the fight when overwhelmed, rather than withdrawing from it. At Gamescom, Sony allows both press and public to play the game for the first time, and it works; enemies move in greater numbers, but Regain pushes you to chase down lost health, even if you often lose more with your bumbling efforts.

"When we ask Miyazaki about his thoughts behind the whole Regain system… Well, his mind works differently to most of us," an incredulous Yamagiwa says. "To us, the red bar is the health gauge of your character. However, [Miyazaki] sees that as a power of will. So if you're going to take on a battle and go through very hard situations, you need to have this power of will to get through it. As you lose will, you're plunging more into despair. When you're in complete despair, you're dead. But so long as you're alive, you can regain hope and carry on going."

These despair-inducing enemies aren't merely *Souls* reskins – hollow ghouls mindlessly waiting for a visitor to draw their attention – but instead bring to mind the villagers of *Resident Evil 4*'s opening areas, going about their business until interrupted. The city of Yharnam is home to people with twisted agendas of their own. The first large mob is found walking through the rain-drenched streets towards a burning stake, ▶

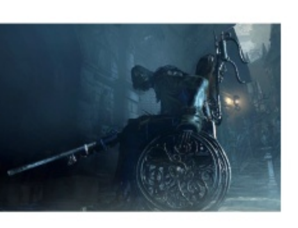


The Regain system and lack of a shield make *Bloodborne*'s mysterious lead a curious blend of aggression and vulnerability



ABOVE **While the cemetery district has swelled with the outbreak, the place radiates the vibe that the dead might not be content to stay buried quietly beneath its topsoil.** LEFT **The transformations of the infected are as detailed as they are grotesque. The Cleric Beast here was once a human with roots in the church, though it's hard to imagine it ever having led the faithful now**





The E3 trailer's menacing wheelchair-bound man prompted plenty of fan speculation, but he's not alone. Old men confined to their wheelchairs, clutching ancient guns for protection, are apparently not very uncommon in Yharnam

and an apparently dead body in a wheelchair found in a loft springs to life to defend his home from burglary with a blazing shotgun.

Your sole defensive measure is a gun of your own. With rapidly diminishing returns over range, the blunderbuss is more a shield than a way to eliminate enemies from afar, effective for chipping away at enemies, but more effective used like *Dark Souls'* parry. A well-timed shot will fell a lunging enemy, setting them up for a backstab from your transforming weapon, which itself offers great tactical flexibility. A transforming axe can be wielded one-handed to hack through townsfolk and monsters individually, or rejigged into a two-handed battleaxe that makes short work of crowds by hitting multiple enemies with a single swing.

Bloodborne remains a game about movement and about crowd control, but here the crowds are larger, and control without a shield is trickier. A thrown pebble can draw an enemy from their pack, but a single squeeze of your gun's trigger is loud enough to bring the rest down on you. The Gamescom demo was tweaked to make it easier than Miyazaki intends the final game to be, but townsfolk lying in ambush still tested our reflexes. Again, while *Demon's Souls* let you advance behind a steel wall, *Bloodborne* quickly teaches you to keep your left trigger finger ready.

FromSoftware has produced one of the most technically outstanding games on PS4

Miyazaki sees a weakness in how *Dark Souls* handled its health items, too, so here health and throwable weapons have been separated. "Being a challenging game, people just kind of used the [item slot] for their health item all the time," Yamagiwa says. "You could say that's just one strategy, but most people used the same strategy, and it was almost like a missed opportunity. By separating [health and items], now players can just freely have whatever they want; people can use different items in different ways. It really opens up an opportunity to exercise your own unique strategy and explore that."

But for all that's new, much that's good about *Demon's* and *Dark Souls* has been retained. Unexpected shortcuts link areas in surprising ways, enemies are dangerous and intimidating – a lunging pack of werewolves had us begging for a shield – and the rich, dark artwork creates another attractively bleak world to explore. A burning torch, returning from *Dark Souls II*, cuts through the darkness, which is near total in indoor spaces.

"It's a unique setting," Yamagiwa says. "It is set in a 19th century environment, but it's not a 19th century London; it's perhaps somewhere far out in Eastern Europe, but it's not based on any existing town or country specifically. There are Gothic elements, but also more modern elements, with lamps and firearms in there. That might give a slightly steampunk feel, but it's a unique blend – something that's unique straight from the mind of Miyazaki.

The story, too, is pure Miyazaki; there only if you want it, but running deep if you're prepared to dig for it. "[Like *Demon's Souls*,] it's not going to be heavily story-oriented in a traditional sense," Yamagiwa says. "Everyone who plays can interpret the game in their own way, but it's a story shrouded in mystery. One motivation for someone to keep playing is to unravel and solve that mystery."

Yet perhaps the most remarkable surprise is the game's technical proficiency. Assisted by Japan Studio, FromSoftware has addressed its recurring weakness and produced one of the most technically outstanding games on PS4. Yharnam's Cleric Beast boss is all hair, blood and fury, its shaggy fur billowing with every move and jets of its thick red blood dousing the mysterious overcoated hero. Moonlight bathes the cobbled streets in stark white, while glowing candles create pinpoints of light in the still night, and all of it at an unshakeable framerate greatly improved since the behind-closed-doors showing at E3.

At a time when Sony is short on firstparty big hitters, *Bloodborne* is more than the most promising game in its early-2015 lineup: it feels like a killer app, an exclusive in its true sense. It's a game with pedigree, with a ready-made fanbase and, even despite that, a game that stands apart from what's come before. ■



Bloodbath

Bloodborne's moveset gains a new charged strike – indeed, some weapons are built almost entirely around long-press attacks. One short-ranged "mechanical contraption" shown at Gamescom was worn like a glove, extending on every attack. It's the third of the game's revealed weapons – the axe and sword cleaver being the others – and all can be transformed mid-strike, adding shield-breaking force to a common, uncharged attack. It all makes for a combat system that sees players changing styles more often, quickly switching between a gun-and-axe combo to a two-handed axe, charging huge strikes to take down crowds, and snapping the axe closed mid-strike to stun an enemy before finishing them with a one-handed backstab.



TOP LEFT **The milky, lifeless eyes of these carrion crows are harrowing, but the razor beaks with a taste for flesh are what you really should be keeping a look out for.** RIGHT **This isn't the first candlelit shrine we've been shown in the game, but it seems that no amount of supplication has been able to stop the nightmare outbreak doing its foul work**

TOP **Monstrous size is one effect of the plague, but so is aggression. No telling yet if it has spread to animals, or if the world of Yharnam has indigenous monsters to go along with its new ones.** ABOVE **Mobs stalk the streets hunting for beasts, although they aren't especially picky. You'll need to be careful to survive their purge.** MAIN **Blood splatters the ground with every swing of your blade, staining the cobbled streets red**



SUNSET OVERDRIVE

Insomniac's Xbox One debut tackles the apocalypse in style

Publisher Microsoft Studios
Developer Insomniac Games
Format Xbox One
Origin US
Release October 28 (US), 31 (EU)

We've said it before, but it bears repeating: *Sunset Overdrive* feels like a return to the sunny, arcade-inspired skies of Sega's Dreamcast. Its chunky, colourful visuals, cheery abandonment of realism and narrative logic, and its breathless rhythm all conspire to create a reassuring sense of nostalgia. But more importantly, *Sunset Overdrive* feels like a proper Insomniac game, a return to form after the studio's first foray away from PlayStation hardware, *Fuse*, which struggled to find an identity within its generic looks and lacklustre implementation.

The one thing *Sunset Overdrive* does have in common with *Fuse* is a focus on co-op. Find one of the photo booths dotted around the city and up to seven other players can join you in a mode called Chaos Squad. This plays out across the same city as the singleplayer campaign, and you get to keep your character, too, but the group votes on which of the proffered co-op-specific missions to attempt. Each new voting opportunity presents players with two choices: one mission will increase the Chaos level – which equates to higher difficulty and greater rewards – in your world, while the other will provide the team with buffs, ammo or health, but only slightly increase the Chaos level, if it does at all.

A competitive element is introduced by the need to play stylishly in order to bag the best loot. This means staying on the move by grinding across rails, roadside barriers and even phone lines; dealing the most damage to enemies; and even getting to the mission start point first, which brilliantly ensures that the moments after voting always turn into a frenetic dash across the city.

Once you've played a handful of co-op missions, the objective switches to Night Defense. Here, you'll have to protect a base, one of several strongholds located across the islands that make up the game's Sunset City. The higher the Chaos level you've accrued in the previous missions, the more aggressive the waves of enemies that you face will be. As well as your weapons and special abilities (called Amps), you'll also be able to place traps during a short period of downtime before each wave arrives. Again, the most stylish players will reap the best rewards, and any weapons or items that you win – some of which can only be acquired by playing Chaos Squad – can be taken back into the singleplayer game with you.

But even when you're not playing with friends, *Sunset Overdrive*'s fallen city feels vibrant and alive. The OD'd – the city's former denizens, who have been mutated by an energy drink called Overcharge Delirium XT – are almost everywhere, clambering ▶



The OD'd are what's left of the unfortunate revellers invited to the launch party of FizzCo's new energy drink



The High Fidelity sends vinyl records scything into the OD'd, lacerating them with the colourful discs. Alongside the array of madcap weapons, there will be hundreds of items of clothing to choose from



SUNSET OVERDRIVE



Many of the OD'd have been fused with machinery during their mutation. The Blower is a nightmarish combination of monster and leaf blower that spurts acid from range

over street furniture and usually gathering in overwhelming numbers. They'll quickly surround you if you stay still for too long, which not only provides a natural incentive to make use of the various grinding surfaces available, but also adds a real sense of mounting pressure as you leave the relative safety of your base and move out towards objectives. The few quiet alleyways or shaded junctions that you come across seem all the more eerie as a result, especially when you're rarely more than a few dozen feet from something that wants to give chase.

Even the most basic OD'd variants will do their utmost to block or disrupt your travel across the city, climbing up onto rails and even scaling buildings to get at you. There's rarely a clear path open, which means you'll often have to leap between grind rails when you're closer to the ground. Up high, it's less of a problem, but many foes have projectile attacks to make your life more difficult. The Gunkers, for instance, shoot gobs of liquid nitrogen that crystallise on rails and other surfaces, causing damage if you run into them, but also knocking you into the hands of the clamouring crowd of mutants below. The hulking Muggers, meanwhile, can leap huge distances and, if not avoided, will lay into you with large, powerful claws. If you do find yourself back on the ground, you'll have to contend with Poppers, which run at you and explode when they get close.

Every move and mechanic is here to amplify the simple pleasure of travelling



The energy-drink-addled population is joined by other enemies, too. Unmutated scavengers called Scabs will defend the areas they occupy and their right to their loot, while at the other end of the scale, FizzCo's armoured robots prove to be extremely hardy aggressors. And while the OD'd and humans are vulnerable to flaming ammo, FizzCo's bots will shrug off such crudely Paleolithic attacks, but are extremely vulnerable to energy-based weapons. Since you'll often be fighting a mix of different enemy types, you'll need to keep switching your weapon as well as your grind trajectory in order to stay effective. A quick tap of LB will switch to the previous weapon you used, making managing this extra layer of strategy easier, while holding the same button will open the weapon wheel and plunge your game into temporary slow motion. While aim assist (and the distance you need to be from items to scoop them up) is more generous while grinding, you can hold the left trigger to slow yourself down further for particularly tricky shots. The right bumper, meanwhile, gives you a short boost to make traversing the large city a little quicker.

Beyond simply jumping, bouncing on cars and grinding, there's a range of advanced traversal moves to master, which will help you with navigation and crowd control. Pressing X while grinding on a cable or suspended rail allows you to Undergrind, hanging by a hook and avoiding any enemies in your path, but tap A right after switching back and you'll leap a little higher than normal. You can also Smash Bounce by hitting A immediately after a ground smash, which will send you shooting back up into the air – particularly useful for attacking a group of enemies and returning to your rail perch before they can retaliate. The height you'll leap to from any springy object (known as Bouncies in the game) is also multiplied by hitting A at the right time, and the longer you fall before you bounce, the higher you'll go.

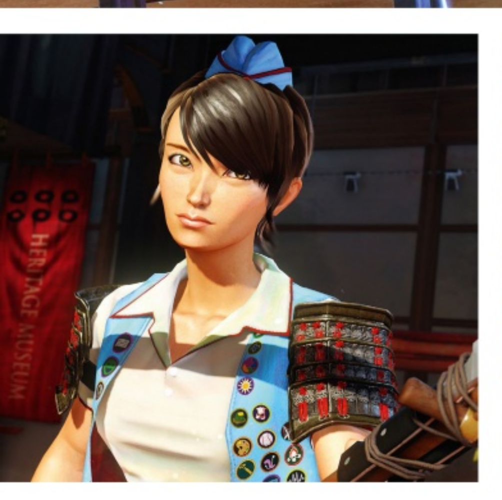
Every move, mechanic and architectural flourish in *Sunset Overdrive* is there to amplify the simple pleasure of travelling through a world with ease and style. But like greats such as *Bayonetta*, which has similar grace, there's satisfying depth to be tapped beyond the accessible basics. Your first few journeys will be defined by a staccato rhythm as you adjust to a world that never wants you to stop, but after an hour or two of acclimatisation, you'll will feel exactly how Insomniac wants you to: unstoppable. Perhaps that momentum will also translate to its host hardware. Taken together, *Sunset Overdrive*'s riotous spin on open-world action and *Forza Horizon 2*'s similarly colourful – and arcade-infused – open-world racing could be the shot in the arm that Xbox One so desperately needs. ■



Amped up

Playing well builds your Style Meter, and filling each of the four sections activates different assignable Amps, which boost your performance. Topping up the first portion will activate your Hero Amps, which give you character bonuses such as emitting a burst of energy when you dodge-roll. Raise the meter half way and you'll activate Weapon Amps, perhaps augmenting your projectiles with a burst of electricity that fans out through crowds to damage multiple enemies. Style level three triggers Epic Amps, which might see you spouting flames from your shoes as you grind. Filling your Style Meter entirely turns everything up to 11, allowing you to deal devastating damage as long as you keep leaping and killing with consummate panache.

TOP LEFT **The OD'd move quickly, and are usually found in large numbers, making any time spent on the ground fraught. Of course, most missions require you to venture down from the relative safety of telephone lines.** TOP RIGHT **Weapon effects are as boisterous as every other aspect of the game, lighting up the city and covering it in splodges of bright orange OD'd blood.** MAIN **FizzCo's bots have been sent into Sunset City to cover up the beverage manufacturer's disastrous product launch. They're robust and aggressive, meaning you'll need to use all of your abilities to take them on effectively**

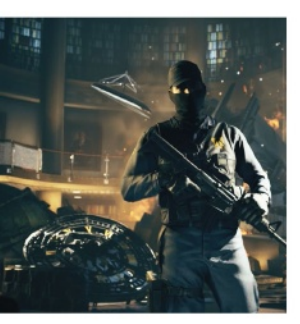




FAR LEFT **As well as the enemies you'll face in the game, there are factions of human survivors. This woman is part of the Troupe Bushido, a group of adult adventurers who took refuge in a samurai museum.** LEFT **While many enemies have a considerable size advantage over you, your ability to move quickly and bounce to the rooftops easily redresses the balance**



Publisher Microsoft
Developer Remedy Entertainment
Format Xbox One
Origin Finland
Release 2015



QUANTUM BREAK

Scratch live-action experiments – Remedy is going fully episodic

Half of *Quantum Break* is the safest game Remedy could ever have made. That half is a cover-based shooter with time-manipulation gimmicks ripped from *Max Payne*, framed in the episodic structure that worked so well for *Alan Wake*, and presented on Xbox One alongside the countless other shooters that Microsoft is so good at selling.

"The theme of time and time manipulation [is] very much a part of Remedy's history," creative director **Sam Lake** tells us. "And at some point it clicked that a season of a TV series is close to the length of a game, and this is a really natural [and] good storytelling structure; it's episodic in the sense that you have a beginning, a middle, and end inside every episode, and usually you have a cliffhanger that makes you want to go on. We did it for *Alan Wake*. I feel that we learned a lot, and obviously we are putting all of our learnings into creating optimal pacing."



Sam Lake, creative director at Remedy

In contrast, the other half of *Quantum Break* seems almost suicidally experimental. "We've been trying things out with live action for a while," Lake says. "In *Alan Wake*, it was the in-game TV series and the prequel live-action show, Bright Falls. We were trying it out and taking baby steps, but it felt like the right time to do something bigger."

Quantum Break's interactive TV drama plays out between episodes, but live-action video is a minefield in games. The disconnect between real actors and polygonal models can break immersion, and the talent and expertise necessary to match modern-day TV is beyond the budgetary reach of many developers. Even if those episodes are executed faultlessly, does any shooter player really want to endure a half-hour interlude between gunfights?

Yet so confident are Remedy and Microsoft in the idea that *Quantum Break* was sold upon those live-action interludes at the Xbox One announcement in May 2013. It would be another 15 months before the studio finally showed the game itself, in which everyman hero Jack Joyce walks through frozen moments in time. The narrative justification for all this is a failed experiment that creates a cascading stutter and threatens to bring about the end of time, but Joyce finds himself able to perceive and move during these moments. When time stops, thousands of particles are frozen in place as explosions halt mid-blast, debris hangs in the air and bullets pause mid-flight. Joyce steps between the cracks in time and sees every unfolding scene in its full beauty or horror, each one its own tableau: a riot in progress, a juggernaut mid-crash, a bridge mid-collapse.

Outside of the stutters, Joyce's abilities let him play cat and mouse with enemies by zipping through time, or freeze them in place along with any bullets or explosives caught in the time bubble. Inside frozen moments, Joyce collides with his enemies in reality-warping gunfights that distort the environment and bend space around the player, and his abilities also let him briefly unfreeze parts of his surroundings, turning an airborne car into a flying missile, or a barrel into a bomb that can be detonated countless times. In shattered time, the game also becomes a platformer where objects caught in a loop present space-warping navigational puzzles. The same car will crash over and over again, rendering a space impassable and forcing Joyce to slow it down or speed himself up to avoid the danger.

> ***Inside the frozen moments, Joyce collides with his enemies in reality-warping gunfights***

As an action game, *Quantum Break* looks beautiful and solid if unsurprising, while the episodes – only glimpsed in pilot form – are surprising if not yet particularly solid. For now, then, perhaps it's enough to know that you can always skip the video if you prefer. ■



On air

The days of the live-action game sequence have passed into notoriety, creators having long since discarded 'full-motion video' as a dependable option for setting a scene, so to call mixing live-action and games a risk in the modern market is an understatement – remember *LocoCycle*? But Remedy is shooting *Quantum Break*'s episodes right now, unhindered by the closure of Xbox Entertainment Studios. Fragments of the pilot episode we've seen looked questionable, but the real episodes have more money and more talent on board, with the promise of matching the quality of a full-scale modern TV production.

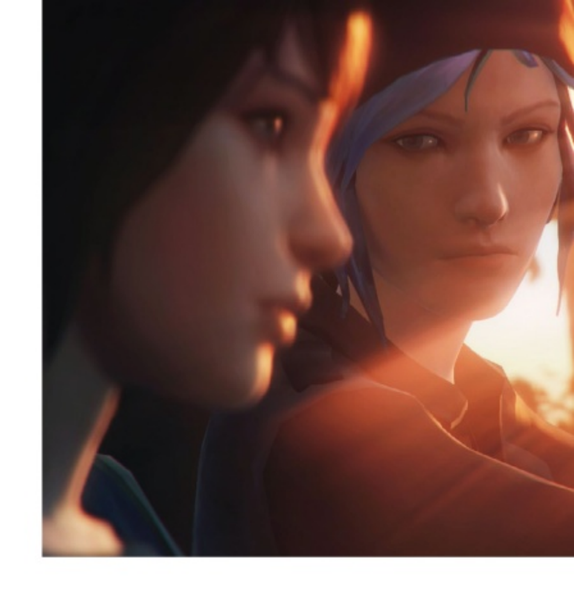


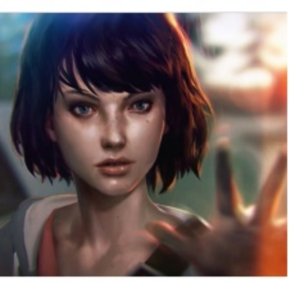
TOP LEFT **Stutters in time are dramatically warped by disruptions within them. Gunfire, explosions and hand-to-hand combat all leave space-distorting ripples in their wakes.**
TOP **By slowing time around him, Joyce can move as a blur and throw punches with enough force to knock out even a helmet-clad enemy.**
ABOVE **Joyce surveys an ongoing riot on a bridge; a riot he'll experience up close as he fights his way through a freeze-frame version of it**

ABOVE **Joyce examines a moment frozen in time. Stutters can be examined in detail for reasons that Remedy has yet to reveal.**
RIGHT ***Quantum Break*'s time-manipulation abilities work differently to *Max Payne*'s Bullet Time, accelerating Joyce and slowing the world around him, as opposed to slowing everything down**

Publisher Square Enix
Developer Dontnod Entertainment
Format 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One
Origin France
Release 2015







LIFE IS STRANGE

Love, loss and friendship drive Dontnod's tale of teenage affection

Videogames are good with guns and engines, less so with soap opera. *The Sims* takes a shot, but is more about offering players a storytelling toolkit than allowing them to interact with a well-told story from a writer's pen. *Life Is Strange*, however, is built around the tale of a teenage girl's return to her hometown after years away. Her friends are older and their relationships have changed. But even in the hands of the talented team at Dontnod, the story needs a sci-fi concession to gamify the melodrama.

"We really think that time manipulation is an interesting feature for this genre," says co-game director **Michel Koch**. "For a game with choice and consequence, you can retry and test some different choices in the short term, but choosing what you think is right now doesn't mean that what you experience in the mid- and longterm will be good. Max's power is limited, and by then it will be too late to rewind [time]."

Max is Maxine Caulfield, a girl gifted with the inexplicable ability to rewind time for short periods. This becomes both a way to experience the many possibilities of each scene and a puzzle-solving tool during the game's mild mental exercises. When Max nudges a tall cabinet to retrieve an item on top, she inadvertently knocks it behind a heavy workbench; a quick rewind, and she can slide a piece of card beneath the cabinet to give the object a safe landing.

"We want players to face the fact that even with this huge, powerful ability, every choice has its consequences and nothing is completely white or black," Koch says. "You will still have to deal with accepting fate and going on with some choices in your life."



TOP **The game's world is painted in autumnal oranges and browns, and its objects rendered in painterly style.** ABOVE **Here, Max discovers Chloe's stepfather's spy camera setup. Authoritarian by nature, he certainly is keeping a watchful eye on his tearaway stepdaughter**

Is there a wildly conspicuous Chekhov's Gun in the first episode of *Life Is Strange*? It's hard to imagine that the pistol Chloe keeps under her bed – a bed in a room that screams 'authority issues' – won't end up being fired







Maxine Caulfield spends much of her time exploring the environment and commenting on the things she sees. The voice acting is occasionally unconvincing, but still well above par



Life Is Strange evokes a dreamlike time and place, with everything amplified. The days in Arcadia are almost too beautiful, the relationships all too intense

Accepting fate is among the game's key themes. When 17-year-old Maxine returns to Arcadia Bay, Oregon, after almost five years away, she finds her former best friend, Chloe, embittered due to an absent father, but an undercurrent of threat and criminality at her old school sets the stage for the teenage girls' reunion. The story thereafter is pure melodrama – an overbearing stepfather, drug-dealing thug, alienated friends, a loaded gun – with only Maxine's time travel ability dragging the story towards the fantastic.

"The rewind is a very important mechanic, but other than that I don't think we're reinventing the wheel," says creative director **Jean-Maxime Moris**. "We like to change one thing at a time. A lot of the interactions you have with the environment you could argue are the same as in other games. There is more voicing of cast than there is in *Gone Home*, maybe as much as in *The Walking Dead*."

The interactions are similar, but here the environment – an autumnal, white-picket-fence kind of town with an acoustic score all of its own – is the game's real star. It's a town as unfamiliar to players as it is to the returning Max, where every item seems imbued with a story. Inspired by the likes of The Virgin Suicides and Bellflower, *Life Is Strange* is dreamlike, laden with nostalgia for a time that only ever partially existed.

"We have one writer on the game, named Christian Devine," Moris says. "He worked on the original *Deus Ex*, and since then he's mainly been working in the field of movies and web series. He's really good, and he understands and has a deep passion for the game. Good writers don't have to be the character that you're writing, obviously, but he has all of his scripts crash-tested with his nieces, so he always has this reality feedback to make sure that teenage girls talk and behave that way. It's good that he also has this second degree of, 'What do you think?'"

Life Is Strange is dreamlike, with nostalgia for a time that only ever partially existed

"Some adventure games have always had this, 'Oh, this is a bottle; this is a lamp' going on," Koch says. "[When you inspect the environment], we wanted a voice that says something about other characters, or recalls something of [Max's] past – something to give more depth to the story if the player wants to dive in it, rather than just being too factual with, 'This is this; this is that.' [Devine] gets that difference."

"But this is still Dontnod's story," Moris emphasises. "The setting, the characters and the original story are all Dontnod's. We think this is different and we think it's worth making. [There's] the Quantic Dream stuff on one side, *The Walking Dead* over there, and *Gone Home* over there… and we're somewhere in the triangle, but, to me, there are not any other games like this. I think that's also why we find it so interesting." ■

Life Is Strange feels more about place than about people. Max, Chloe and her father are all archetypes, but the world is a textured character of its own





Parts time

Life Is Strange is built on a modified version of Unreal 3, and will be distributed in five episodes. "Our goal is to have no more than a month between them," says Moris. "All of the episodes are being worked on as we speak, and that's really one of our key goals in production: to be able to let players to know when to expect the next one. We think it's key for episodic games. Ideally, we'd like to be able to help have a trailer or slate at the end of each episode that says 'Next episode coming this date,' [or] people will get lost and drop out of the franchise. Quantic Dream's games are much more expensive, and you could argue games like *The Walking Dead* are there, but I think we have higher production values; I think we're the only ones in this space [at this budget] with a brand-new IP."

Publisher Activision/Sierra
Developer Lucid Games
Format 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One
Origin UK
Release Q4







GEOMETRY WARS 3: DIMENSIONS

Lucid's throwing shapes at the return of this XBLA icon

What's next for *Geometry Wars*? The team at Lucid certainly has the pedigree to move the series on, being packed with refugees from the dissolution of Bizarre Creations, which worked on *Geometry Wars* as it evolved from an Easter egg in *Project Gotham Racing 2* to Xbox Live Arcade figurehead and finally a boxed game for DS and Wii. The XBLA release was so successful that for a spell in the mid-2000s, a colossal number of downloadable games were twin-stick shooters. Few, however, matched the elegance of *Geometry Wars*. In its sequels, it gained new modes, multiplayer and a campaign, so what's next? What's left, even?

"Three-dimensional grids," says creative director **Craig Howard**. "You're no longer playing on a 2D board; you play all the way around the grid, and also the grids change, morph and grow throughout the whole thing."

Dimensions' battlefields are floating 3D objects – spheres, cylinders, a giant peanut – onto which enemies spawn. To signal their arrival on a 3D field, *Dimensions* 'beams' them onto the grid in shafts of light. Some grids will roll independently of player movement, throwing walls and large obstacles in your path, while others change shape mid-battle, opening up new spaces and forming new bottlenecks as the fight intensifies.

"It adds a whole new level of complexity," Howard says. "Line of sight, knowing where you spawn, making sure you keep an eye on where you are on the grid all matters. The campaign has 50 individual challenges – each will [take place on] a different shape, some are a different game mode, some have unique score challenges based on it, and every level has its own leaderboard. If your



ABOVE **Bullets follow linear paths, creating spectacular cascades of fire that follow the contours of the grid.** BELOW LEFT ***Geometry Wars* is among the most visually arresting twin-stick shooters ever made, and the move to three dimensions only improves the spectacle**





Dimensions' bosses clearly went to the same school as those in Cave and Treasure shooters, what with their evolving forms, spectacular bullet storms, and defences that have to be outsmarted, not simply outgunned

friends beat you on a certain level, we'll notify you. It's *Geometry Wars*, so it has to be competitive – it's all about scores."

Well, not all; it's also about levelling, and perfecting ideas that came before. The classic Infinity mode and Waves minigame return, together with some of *Retro Evolved 2*'s more exotic modes. The walls and obstacles that were so important to *Galaxies'* campaign are back as towering 3D shapes, too, and the selection of drones from *Galaxies* has been tweaked, offering enhanced abilities and levelling up as you advance through the game's 50 stages. Brand new are boss enemies and a competitive multiplayer mode that Lucid won't detail yet, but Howard hints at involving MOBA-like farming of weaker enemies before taking on other players.

"They're unique modes to *Geometry Wars*," executive producer **Nick Davies** says. "We could've just put two ships on the grid with massive shields and have players play a numbers game, but no. We're doing some quite interesting things. We know that it wouldn't work just shoehorning in traditional multiplayer game modes."

"There were a lot of things we had planned when we finished *Retro Evolved 2*," Howard says. "We wanted over 10,000 enemies, and we were talking about complex 3D, live shapes... It's a lot of maths and there were a lot of hurdles to go through, and it wasn't just about the technical things – it was also then the actual playing, and does 3D break it? We want this total, focused, Zen-like experience with *Geometry Wars*. Once we got the basic tech working, we worked on the second-to-second gameplay to make sure that was right, and that started opening up these possibilities."

Much of *Dimensions* has its roots in *Galaxies*, but the positive press *Galaxies* received was for the basic *Geometry Wars* elements, rather than its weak campaign. "There had to be some more depth to the singleplayer," Davies says. "Before, it was purely linear, but in this one you've got stars [you can earn on each stage], and you need a certain amount of stars to take on a boss. The levels change as you play and evolve with you, and that's something we did a little bit with *Retro Evolved 2*. You need to play some bits a few times so you can understand the depth before you move on. So we've done that, and that opens it up a bit more. It makes it a satisfying singleplayer experience, really. We wouldn't have made *Geometry Wars* with a few extra levels to it. We wanted to give it enough meat and substance to make it worthy of the next part of the franchise."

> ***"It wouldn't work just shoehorning in traditional multiplayer game modes"***

Is there a large enough appetite for a meaty *Geometry Wars* in 2014, though? Sure, *Dimensions* will be PlayStation owners' first taste of the series, but PS3 was not safe from genre fatigue. Indeed, the sheer number of twin-stick shooters in the mid-2000s saw the genre rise and fall almost as quickly as peripheral-heavy rhythm-action games. It remains a limited genre, but arriving almost a decade after *Retro Evolved* does make *Dimensions* feel fresh all over again.

"To be honest, I'm just really excited," Howard says. "I grew up by the seaside and was weaned on arcade games, where it's about getting those perfect seconds and having an audience. *Geometry Wars* is like the ultimate killing game. Well, the ultimate shape-killing game. It's what we love, and it's been a while, but there's still time for something that blows your mind." ■



Intergalactic planar-tary

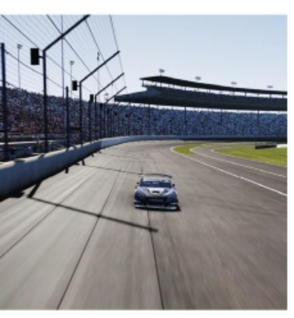
Waves is among the returning modes for *Dimensions*, but it's joined by a host of new counterparts, several of which specifically take advantage of the new shifting playspace. "We've got one we call Claustrophobia, where the grid changes shape," Howard says. "It creates a pinch point you have to find room to move in. We've also got one we call Sniper, where we limit bullets, which is an interesting take on the game. We've had things where it's like, 'Is it going in? Is it not?' We didn't want to put things in that weren't totally 100 per cent, so we've spent so much time testing and playing… It's pretty much where all these modes have come from."

A rolling cylinder grid throws deadly walls in players' paths, but cleverly those same obstructions can be turned into tactical advantages against the waves of neon enemies



Publisher Slightly Mad Studios
Developer In-house
Format PC, PS4, Wii U, Xbox One
Origin UK
Release Nov 21 (US), Nov 24 (EU), 2015 (Wii U)





PROJECT CARS

How Slightly Mad Studios is aiming to go "beyond reality"

Project Cars' rendition of Brands Hatch feels just right. We know this because we're sat in the track's paddock complex having just driven a few laps for comparison. Even the weather on this unremarkable, overcast day has been precisely recreated by virtue of the fact that the fastidious Slightly Mad team has modelled the near Solar System for each circuit in the game.

"Each track has a GPS location and that means that we know where that track is in the world, and we can accurately model the Sun and the Moon and the constellations above for whatever time of day or date you're racing," creative director **Andy Tudor** explains. "You can dial it to any day of any year and it will be accurate to what the atmospheric conditions were at that particular time."

Every track comes with its own climate data, too, specifying whether the location is Mediterranean, marine or desert, for example. As a result, the sun will appear more red when racing in Dubai due to atmospheric conditions. "It means that it's completely accurate to real life," Tudor continues. "And if you've got an online connection it will fetch bang-up-to-date weather and atmospheric conditions from the web."



Slightly Mad creative director Andy Tudor

But Tudor admits that 1:1 accuracy in the racing genre isn't likely to impress players who expect that as a base standard. Which is why Slightly Mad is going "beyond reality", as Tudor puts it, in a concerted effort to better represent the emotional response of racing around a track, not just the mathematical one – which means exaggerating some features to give a greater sense of scale and drama.

"Obviously we have the mathematical data, but in games some things just look wrong, or don't get across the actual emotion of what it feels like to be there," Tudor says. "The Nordschleife feels like a rollercoaster – you turn round a corner and there's an uphill climb but it just looks like a wall in front of you. So obviously we need to create that sensation in the game."



In order to achieve this, the team combines personal experience, reference photos, and feedback from professional drivers like Oliver Webb. And while the heart-in-mouth excitement of hustling a BMW M3 through the dramatically inclined Hailwood Hill that follows Brands Hatch's first corner isn't quite there, the dip certainly feels more pronounced than in other digital versions of the circuit we've experienced. Such creative licence hasn't affected lap times either, as proven by comparison videos of in-game laps and Webb's real-life equivalents, which are within tenths of a second of each other.

But there's less positive tension to be found in the game's current handling model. On PS4 (and indeed with a 360 pad on the PC build), cars feel skittish and unpredictable, while an aggressive return-to-centre setup snaps the wheel back instantly when you let go, making smooth cornering difficult. We dip into the build's highly customisable settings and manage to improve some aspects, while worsening others. In its current form the game feels built for steering wheels, and playing with one improves things immeasurably. Switching peripherals can't elevate the AI, unfortunately, which currently lacks charisma and is apparently oblivious to our presence – but at least our opponents' unsporting barging manoeuvres demonstrate *Project Cars'* excellent open-wheel physics, as our vehicle leaves the ground violently in a snarl of shrapnel.

The game will ship with control and AI presets alongside its broad array of sliders, of course, and hopefully these will deliver a more resolved drive. Slightly Mad's community-driven development has crowd sourced a potentially spectacular racing game, but the studio's desire to accommodate every player's preferences has put *Project Cars* in danger of being pulled in too many directions, without a steering authorial hand to guide it back to the racing line. ■



Open wheels

When you start *Project Cars*, everything will be unlocked: vehicles, tracks and even events. It's a common setup for PC driving sims, but this will be the first time a console racing game has abandoned the traditional grinding template. "It's getting to the point now that I think we're all a little bit sick of going into the next game and having to start at the bottom all over again," Tudor says. "When you take into account the fact that the next generation of gamers coming in are used to having more open-ended sandbox experiences, it just made sense to get rid of those barriers. As soon as we did, we knew it was the right decision."



TOP *Project Cars* offers the usual range of views, including the increasingly popular GoPro-style option. There's also a helmet cam if you want to up the drama.
RIGHT *Gran Turismo 6*'s suspension physics are still to be matched, and with the settings we've used *Project Cars* feels just a little too floaty using a controller instead of a wheel

TOP Things look considerably sharper and, oddly, more colourful on the PC version compared with the PS4 build we've played, but it's far from ugly in console form.
ABOVE With no artificially locked vehicles, you can hop straight into your favourite car and event types as soon as you start playing the game. Your career will still provide a sense of progression, though.
MAIN *Project Cars*' rain effects are spectacular. Here, the weather has cleared up, leaving a damp track, but in full force the game's storms reduce visibility and are genuinely unnerving



YAKUZA ZERO

Publisher Sega **Developer** Yakuza Studio **Format** PS3, PS4 **Origin** Japan **Release** Spring



Might this be the game that finally convinces Sega to change course, persuading it to throw open the doors on its localisation team's dusty office and restore Toshihiro Nagoshi's *Yakuza* series to western shelves? It would certainly make sense, given that the game sees Nagoshi and team wind the clock back to 1988 to tell Kazuma Kiryu's origin story. With no need for knowledge of the prior games, this could be the perfect opportunity to grow the audience, introducing a generation of newcomers to a charming, if slightly clunky, series, as well as fan-favourite headcase Goro Majima – who will also be playable.

SAINTS ROW: GAT OUT OF HELL

Publisher Deep Silver **Developer** Volition **Format** 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One **Origin** US **Release** Jan 27



Given that the way *Saints Row IV* ended gave developer Volition the licence to take the series in any direction – or to any time period – it chose, it's a little deflating to see this standalone spinoff set on such well-trodden ground, even if it is being done with a signature *Saints* twist. Johnny Gat, the real star of *Saints Row II*, sets out to rescue the US president from an arranged marriage to Satan's daughter Jezebel using a predictably bonkers array of weaponry.

ALONE WITH YOU

Publisher/developer Benjamin Rivers
Format PS4, Vita **Origin** Canada **Release** 2015



Once we would have automatically assumed that any game with 16bit visuals was being made for PC, but these days if it has pixel art it's probably coming to PlayStation. So it is for *Alone With You*, a pastel-shaded sci-fi adventure about human relationships with a gender-ambiguous protagonist.

POKKEN TOURNAMENT

Publisher Bandai Namco **Developer** In-house
Format Coin-op **Origin** Japan **Release** 2015



Will *Tekken x Street Fighter* ever be released? While Katushiro Harada and team stay quiet on their Capcom collaboration, the fruits of their hook-up with The Pokémon Company will be in Japanese arcades next year. Design headaches include how many of *Pokémon*'s 700-strong character roster to include.

PERSONA 5

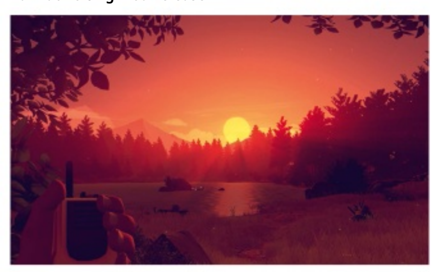
Publisher/developer Atlus **Format** PS3, PS4
Origin Japan **Release** 2015



News of a PS4 release for the next in Atlus's JRPG-cum-dating-sim was the best thing to come out of Sony's pre-TGS press conference. Director Katsura Hashino wants it to be more "thematically approachable", but don't expect a dumbing down: he directed the teeth-gnashingly difficult *Catherine*.

FIREWATCH

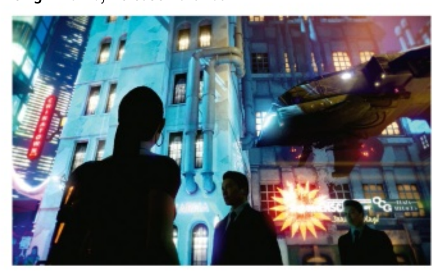
Publisher/developer Campo Santo
Format PC **Origin** US **Release** TBA



The debut from indie supergroup Campo Santo looks moody, emotive and, thanks to the involvement of Olly Moss, quite beautiful, but it invites as many questions as it answers. The most pressing of all: why are the protagonist's hands so big?

DREAMFALL CHAPTERS: THE LONGEST JOURNEY

Publisher/developer Red Thread Games **Format** PC, PS4
Origin Norway **Release** November



The continuation of Ragnar Tørnquist's *The Longest Journey* adventure series, *Dreamfall Chapters* is set across two parallel universes: Stark, a cyberpunk city, and fantasy land Arcadia. Protagonist Zoë Castillo sets out to uncover the secrets behind a disease that threatens reality itself.

LET IT DIE

Publisher GungHo Online Entertainment **Developer** Grasshopper Manufacture **Format** PS4 **Origin** Japan **Release** 2015



Has there ever been a more sadly appropriate name for a videogame? Grasshopper's free-to-play PS4 brawler looks wretched, the fountains of claret produced by its gory kills presumably designed to distract from its bland character designs, low-res environments and basic animation.

THIS WAR OF MINE

Publisher/developer 11 Bit Studios **Format** PC **Origin** Poland **Release** 2014



In *This War Of Mine*, Polish developer 11 Bit Studios tries out a novel spin on videogames' most abused setting, focusing not on the weight carried on the shoulders of those in the trenches, but those hunkered down in what remains of a war-torn city. It's a fine theory, which in practice translates to a sort of time-shifted *Minecraft*, in which you scavenge resources by night and spend the day using them to rebuild a shelter and the survivors' morale.

RESIDENT EVIL: REVELATIONS 2

Publisher/ developer Capcom **Format** 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One **Origin** Japan **Release** Early 2015



Another month, another *Resident Evil*: hot on the heels of the announcement of the original's HD remaster comes news of this sequel to Capcom's 2012 take on survival horror. *Revelations 2* will, like its predecessor, be apparently closer in spirit to earlier games in the series than the straight-to-video action flicks that the mainline games have become. Claire Redfield stars in an instalment set in between the events of *Resident Evils 5* and *6*; Moira, Barry Burton's daughter, will also feature. Expect the new industry standard of 1080p and 60fps on PS4, Xbox One and PC, and rather more modest performance on 360 and PS3.

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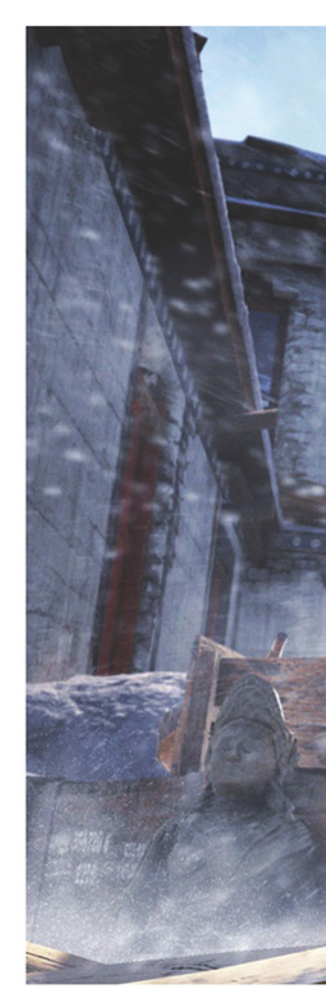
From Dust

At the top of the world, Far Cry 4 takes the grist of its ancestor and colours it with a narrative that's driven by you

By Michael Gapper

Game Far Cry 4
Publisher Ubisoft
Developer In-house (Montreal)
Format 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One
Release November 18





Jason Brody is dead – if not definitively in *Far Cry*'s narrative, then certainly in spirit. *Far Cry 3* was as mechanically solid as it was thematically inconsistent, a divide embodied by Jason hunting in the woods for countless game days to make a new tiger-skin ammo pouch while his friend Keith Ramsay is being held prisoner by violent maniac and implied rapist Buck Hughes. Players' actions made Brody a jerk, the way he was written didn't help, and critics called him a white saviour in a land of colonialist notions. Ubisoft noticed.

"Obviously, we knew that we had issues after we shipped [*Far Cry 3*] with specific themes and specific characters," says **Mark Thompson**, who has taken on the role of narrative director for this sequel. "We know a lot of people weren't happy with Jason Brody as a hero; he rubbed some people up the wrong way. For [Ghale], we didn't want to make the character like a blank slate. We knew that we wanted some level of characterisation there to give people a reason to be in Kyrat and some easily understandable motivation. We wanted that character to be kind of a vessel that people could easily fall into without being too offended, but we didn't want someone so bland that you didn't even realise they were there. It's a tough balance.

"I think it comes down to this: with *Far Cry 3* we didn't realise just how powerful the open world would be. It wasn't until we got people in to play the game every day during beta that we started realising. The playtest manager would come down and say, 'We've had guys who only played two story missions in 16 hours.' We were like, 'Shit, is that a problem?' No, all the appreciation results were through the roof. We had invested so heavily in the story and the main missions and the traditional narrative structure for an open-world game, but we hadn't put the same kind of belief in the narrative of the open world."

"THE OPEN WORLD IS BY FAR THE STRONGEST ELEMENT OF FAR CRY AND IS THE AREA THAT WE'RE WINNING"



"In any franchise, your biggest fear is being too close to the previous version," creative director **Alex Hutchinson** says. "Your second-biggest fear is being radically different. [For *Far Cry 4*], we wanted to avoid the saviour motif, we wanted to align the physical game story with the narrative, and we wanted to make you more a part of the game. If you have your buddies in torture basements but you're off hunting pigs to make a new wallet, there's some dissonance between those ideas. We can do better."

Far Cry 4's hero is Ajay Ghale, a native of the fictional Himalayan region of Kyrat, returning home after years away to find it dominated by British/Chinese despot Pagan Min. In truth, Brody was a symptom rather than the cause of *Far Cry 3*'s narrative woes, but Ghale is nonetheless a deliberate antithesis of the American in almost every way: polite, respectful, a local of sorts, and a character whose backstory places him at the centre of the action, rather than framing him as a foreigner here to save the land of others.

Thompson is a former level designer who worked on *Far Cry 3*, and the fact he's heading up the narrative for *Far Cry 4* demonstrates the sequel's drive to push mechanical elements to the foreground. "We wanted to align the physical game with the narrative in a sense," Hutchinson says. "The open world is by far the strongest element of *Far Cry* and is the area that we're winning. You shouldn't, in my opinion, put money, time, effort and talent into making poor things ▶

VERTICAL LIMIT

Map design is far more complex for *Far Cry 4*, thanks to all the vertiginous geography. "It's much more difficult to do mountains than an island," game director Patrik Methe says. "At the core, you're surrounded by cliffs, so it could become hideous unless you have new ways to navigate. That's why we introduced the grappling hook, which allows you to climb very efficiently. We had the glider and the wingsuit, but this time around they're much more useful, because you have the grapple to get to high ground and then from there you can very easily jump and travel long distances. My personal favourite way to [travel] is the buzzer, which is the very small chopper. And when you find it – boom! Suddenly, the whole open world changes."



ABOVE **Ghale's journey takes him high into the Himalayas. Their distance from Kyrat's lower hills was prohibitive, so the maps are instanced away from the rest of the open world.** LEFT **This man, who offers to help with border control before a passport check turns into a bloodbath, becomes an early hostage. Narrative retooling means you won't leave him to rot**



Alex Hutchinson
CREATIVE DIRECTOR

Has developing with 360 and PS3 in mind throttled your creative ambitions at all?
I think it's an interesting one. I think even on 360 and PS3, we were constrained by our own ability to execute more than the hardware. Art direction is more important these days than how many polys there are. Shooters in general date poorly, because they tend to be more grounded, and everyone [used to be] terrified of your grass shader being outdone, but I think we're past that now. Art direction wins. You could sit it on the shelf for five months before you release it. Good art direction won't age, you know? In the end, realism is this diminishing curve.

You served as the creative director on the most heavily scripted *Assassin's Creed*, both in terms of narrative and mission design; your involvement with *Far Cry* has scared some corners of the Internet...
I was lead designer on *Spore*, on *The Sims 2*, so I've done more emergent narrative than most. It was only *Assassin's Creed* [*III*] that was a more structured experience. We leaned into trying to wrap up and finally finish a bunch of stories that had begun seven years earlier. It started to spiral out of control, and the weight of that meant that we ended up with a very heavy narrative. I think we would change the pacing [now]. The setup was long, more like an RPG setup than an action-adventure setup. When you're dealing with history, even your ability to make radical edits is harder. What about if we just lose the years from 1788 to 1791? We can't, because nothing makes any sense now.

***Far Cry 3* had its own lengthy setup stage, which was edited down to a 60-second montage for the final game. Are you happy with how you're leading people into *Far Cry 4* and the world of Kyrat?**
Far Cry 3's original intro was an hour long. There's a long cutscene at the start of *Far Cry 4*. You saw the first part at E3, which is half of it. It's not Kojima length and not as long as *Far Cry 2*'s intro. After that, it's about 20 minutes [on average] before you're like, 'Wow, I have a huge area to explore.' I'm proud of that. If we could have done the opening cutscene faster, that would've been good, but already it's like you're stuffing information into people.

Mysticism and magic still play their part in the *Far Cry* mythos. In the imagination of Jason Brody, drug-fuelled magic took him to confront his fears, his relationships and his destiny. In *Far Cry 4*, Ajay Ghale steps into the shoes of an ancient warrior and fights alongside a tiger

better; you should make the things that are amazing even more amazing. Don't say: 'We don't have the corridor rollercoaster rides of *COD* – we should build those in!' No, we should delete all of them! We're already winning with our open world, so we should accelerate. More emergence, more agency, more ability for the player to tell more elaborate stories, and more connection between the story and the world."

In the simplest example, if one of Ghale's friends was in immediate danger, players would have to help them immediately. But simple has a habit of becoming complex in *Far Cry*'s world, once bombs are exploding, trucks are flipping and elephants are stampeding. This, says Hutchinson, is *Far Cry*'s real narrative: player-driven emergent moments no two people will experience in the exact same way. In *Far Cry 4*, the story is a slave to the action, because action is what *Far Cry* does best.

"I think the spirit of *Far Cry* is giving you the freedom to play the game the way you want to play it, and the surprise of what's around the next corner," executive producer **Dan Hay** says. "We have a very physical game, and you can solve a lot of your problems with a gun, but it can't always be one flavour. We have to offer choice."

"In a game that you've bought for £60, you're going to win," Hutchinson says. "In 20 hours, I'm going to shoot the bad guy with a shotgun. The question is how you get there. In *Far Cry 3*, it was cutscene, mission, cutscene, mission, right? But when I talk to players [about *Far Cry 3*], everyone is going to talk about the open world and nobody is going to talk about the story. Why? It's because your story is the same as my story, so I don't need to tell you about it. So what we've tried to do – and we haven't actually talked about it much – is that even though you will take on Pagan Min's empire in some fashion, we've jammed as much choice and anecdote-generating branches into that core narrative [as we could]."

Far Cry 4's great innovation isn't co-op, or the elephants and rhinoceroses, or the gyrocopter, or the wingsuit, but a true branching narrative with the aim of changing the way players talk about the game. Those emergent anecdotes that formed the basis of discussion about *Far Cry 3* will now be framed by a story to match.

"We have amazing story-generating tools, toys and challenges in the *Far Cry* universe," Hutchinson says. "And now you'll sometimes have two sales pitches on how you should approach [a mission]. Depending on which you choose, some of the objectives and subsequent missions will change, and eventually you'll get a big decision at the end. We didn't want the classic Jedi Knight 'light side and dark side' thing. This one is a more fluid, narrative, objective-based, experience-based [game], rather than making you choose between dark and light for Gloves Of Power or Boots Of Speed." ▶



Dan Hay, *Far Cry 4*'s executive producer



Some players complained that *Far Cry 2*'s choices were ultimately meaningless, but every choice would dramatically reshape the missions. One person would present you with a mission, and another would offer an alternative means to complete it; then you had to choose how to proceed. It meant players made real decisions rather than chasing whichever path got them extra gameplay, and a version of this idea returns for *Far Cry 4*. "It's not a meter that you're filling, and there are no real rewards attached to it apart from making the choice and changing the game," Hutchinson says. "There are about seven or eight different endings in the game at the moment, depending on how you play."

Far Cry 3's enemy outposts return, as do the radio towers and the shark-skin weapon holsters. As goofy as those systems often were, they worked, if not always quite how Ubisoft Montreal had hoped. The outposts proved so popular that some players effectively stripped the world of content by liberating camp after camp from enemy hands, removing any essence of hostility. Ubisoft patched *Far Cry 3* to allow players to repopulate outposts with a menu option, whereas *Far Cry 4* outposts can repopulate themselves.

"Kyrat is in civil war, so even if you take out an outpost, it's going to turn the area friendlier, but it's not going to suddenly make the enemies disappear," game director Patrik Methe says. "The world will still be populated, and we have new encounters. We have retaliation parties – troops basically sent to retake the outpost. It's not going to happen often – we remember all the backlash about the respawning checkpoints [in *Far Cry 2*] – but once in a while you will receive a message that an outpost has been attacked."

Another encounter sees Pagan Min send a death squad comprised of armoured vehicles and heavily armed troops into areas Ghale has fully secured. "They roam the map and kill everything in sight," Methe says. "They're not there to kill you; they're there to kill civilians, kill animals and destroy everything in their path. It's up to you to decide: do you want to engage them? Chase them down? Destroy them? It's going to be a huge challenge, because they're very tough."

There are tangible rewards for defending besieged outposts or stopping the death squads, but the real payoff comes in a constant trickle of karma – a measure of Ghale's relationship with the people of Kyrat. For Ubisoft Montreal, it's a way to make the civilians more meaningful in a mechanical sense. "If I need to shoot the baby to get the Gloves Of Power? Sorry, babies. Bang," Hutchinson says. "We all know in our hearts that it's not real, so we have to go the extra mile to make people care."

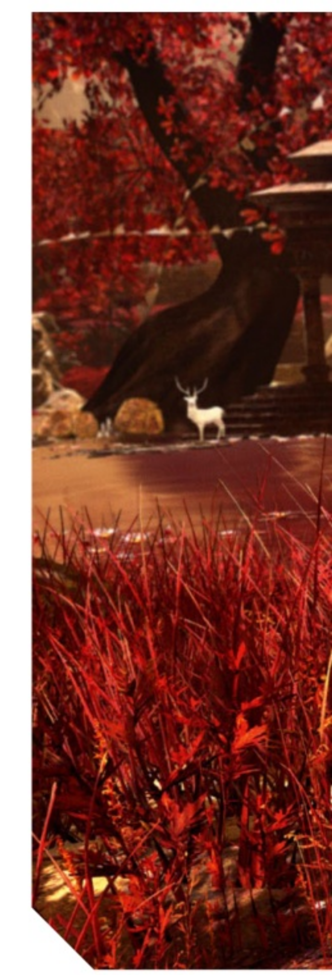
Karma's reward is – predictably enough – firepower. "When you save civilians, it gives you karma," Methe says. "There are all kinds of advantages, whether it be better prices at the shop for weapons and gear, or guns for hire. You can call an AI rebel that fights with you, and based on your progression and karma, the rebel will become stronger and stronger. You can set him to follow or send him to attack. If you jump in a vehicle, he's going to jump at the turret if there's a turret. But if there's no turret, then he'll jump into the trunk or passenger seat, and from there he's able to shoot. He's pretty smart."

But the strangest of *Far Cry 4*'s upgrades owes a debt to the strangest of *Far Cry* games: *Blood Dragon*. *Far Cry 3*'s standalone sci-fi expansion saw outposts grow to huge proportions to accommodate cyborg T.rexes. The massive creatures demanded new pathfinding routines, new types of interaction, and a whole new scale to the outdoor spaces, all of which helped inform the behaviours of *Far Cry 4*'s elephants and rhinoceroses, and the designs of the outposts upon which they can be unleashed. "*Blood Dragon* was something we had in mind right from the get-go," Methe says. "If you put an elephant in a *Far Cry 3* camp, it wouldn't work well. "

"And when you take a look at how the tigers are acting in *Far Cry 4*, it's absolutely a child of *Blood Dragon*," Hay adds. "The idea that you pull out the dragons' cyber hearts and throw them to make the dragons show up… Now it's a hunk of meat and a tiger."

To call it iteration is underselling it. Like any modern Ubisoft game, *Far Cry* borrows ideas ▶

"WE ALL KNOW IN OUR HEARTS THAT IT'S NOT REAL, SO WE HAVE TO GO THE EXTRA MILE TO MAKE PEOPLE CARE"





FREEDOM FIGHTER

***Far Cry 4* is the latest Ubisoft game to rely on the company's well-worn open-world content-delivery mechanisms, but Hutchinson can't understate their impact on your sense of freedom. "Some of these things have become clear to people as 'the Ubisoft structure'," he admits, "but the *Far Cry* version – climbing towers to reveal new challenges, clearing outposts to unlock different quests – allows the player to drive their own experience in the game, which is the key to it being fun. The scariest thing [for a designer] in a tunnel rollercoaster kind of game is 'Does this player want the game to get harder now? Does this player want a break? Something funny? Intense?' Allowing players to structure that makes everyone's life better."**



Designed by Ubisoft Toronto, the otherworldly levels (pictured) strip you of all but your bow and a tiger ally as you explore a world of floating platforms and teleporting enemies. We played the second area, and it was by far the low point of our demo – a linear path with little space to improvise. Every spatial puzzle involved the same solution: send in the tiger, then mop up the stragglers



Mark Thompson
NARRATIVE DIRECTOR

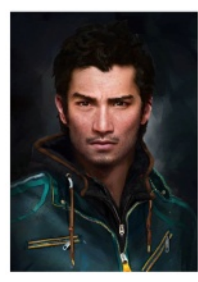
What do you want for players to get out of *Far Cry 4* that they never got from *Far Cry 3*?
I spent most of my time at university playing [*The Elder Scrolls III*] *Morrowind*. I'm a huge fan of how Bethesda crafts its open worlds and fills them. Sometimes, you don't know whether what you're doing is on the main path or not, because there's so much embedded in the environment. That's what I wanted to do with *Far Cry 4*: make sure that people who don't follow the critical path still hear about the same characters, hear the same stories, and understand the world and backstory. [On a systemic level,] I think the theme has been 'consequences'. I think the magic it will have for me is when two people talk to each other about a mission, and they're talking to each other as if they think there was only one way that could've happened.

What has been the biggest change for you since moving from level to narrative design?
It's the difference between objectivity and data-driven feedback and absolutely unpredictable subjectivity. With level design, you get concrete feedback: you can look at a heat map of a section of the world and you can see where people are spending too much time and getting stuck. You can see how the flow of a map can be changed by making adjustments and you can rapidly change it and do another test to see if it worked. With story, you have different groups of people and their own biases, life experiences, perspectives, and they just completely blow away any predictable results. It's really hard to commit to a specific character and expect ten million people to all universally agree that this character is awesome.

A lesson learned from Jason Brody?
Obviously he appeals to some demographics more than he appeals to others. We know that a lot of people didn't like him. I'm starting to realise, having worked on firstperson games for a while now, that there are two distinct groups of people who cannot reconcile their argument. Some people absolutely believe that if they're playing a firstperson game, then they are that character [they create through play], and any time the game tries to tell them they're another character, they'll fight it. Then there are other people who need to have a character for them to understand why they're even playing.

Massive scale makes sniper rifles a valuable tool, especially out in the open world, where an AI ally or co-op friend can assault an outpost on foot while being covered from afar

"I STARTED TO BECOME UNCOMFORTABLE WITH THE 'I'M GOING TO SAVE THE WORLD BY KILLING EVERYBODY' THING"



The child of the woman Pagan Min once loved and the man who was his greatest adversary, Ajay Ghale returns to Kyrat as Min's most honoured and revered guest. It can't last

from itself and every other title in production at the publisher's global studios, but there's a constant push to bolster the systems that work before imposing new ones upon the game. Under the hood, less visible upgrades radically change the way *Far Cry 4* plays, even if few players will ever notice the evolution.



"I would play *Far Cry 3* and have a great experience, but I was able to cheat," Hay says. "I could put the AI in a couple of spots where they didn't look the smartest, and you could go places they couldn't go. In *Far Cry 4*, they're going after you with a lot of the same tools that you're going after them with. We've done an entire new level of AI in terms of their navigation, their intentions, their abilities to counter against your stealth. It has the ability to act in tandem, and to react to the animals. All you have to do is watch how the AI deals with an elephant, how they take cover, how they keep watching for you, and where they can physically go. They can go to places they could never go in *Far Cry 3*."

Far Cry 4 is yet another open-world systemic game from Ubisoft, but perhaps the first to feel truly complete since *Assassin's Creed II*. After that high point came bombs and boats, booty and broken pathfinding, with both highs and lows but none that ever felt as fully realised as *Assassin's Creed II*'s Italy. *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* was best when played without focus, *Watch Dogs* will need a sequel before the game comes close to matching the ambition on display in its original E3 reveal, and *The Crew*'s narrative feels rather at odds with its mechanics. But here, *Far Cry 4* feels like *Far Cry* perfected, without extraneous modes or unnecessary systems that bloat the world to no real end. It's a game that puts absolute faith in its systems and is perhaps the most hands-off piece of design in Ubisoft's history of open-world games. It's a game where the story is dictated by the action, and the action is dictated by the player. It's as simple as that.

"After a while I started to become very uncomfortable with the whole 'I'm going to save the world by killing everybody' thing," Hutchinson says. "I don't want to tell that story with a shooter. For me, it's always going to be about power, control, and how much fun it is to shoot people with lots of guns." ■



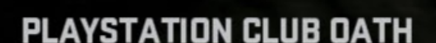
See more of *Far Cry 4* in **Edge**'s iPad edition







PLAYSTATION CLUB OATH



I SOLEMNLY VOW
TO DRIVE FOR MY CLUB.
TO RIDE WHEN YOU RIDE,
DRIFT WHEN YOU DRIFT.
EVEN WHEN MY ALLIES LAY DORMANT.
EVEN WHEN MY SIGNIFICANT OTHER
DECIDES THAT TONIGHT, IS DATE NIGHT.
I WILL ACCEPT ANY CHALLENGE.
AND ALTHOUGH I MAY NOT ALWAYS BE THE FASTEST,
I WILL ALWAYS BE THERE.
BECAUSE AS LONG AS WE DRIVE TOGETHER,
WE WILL WIN TOGETHER.

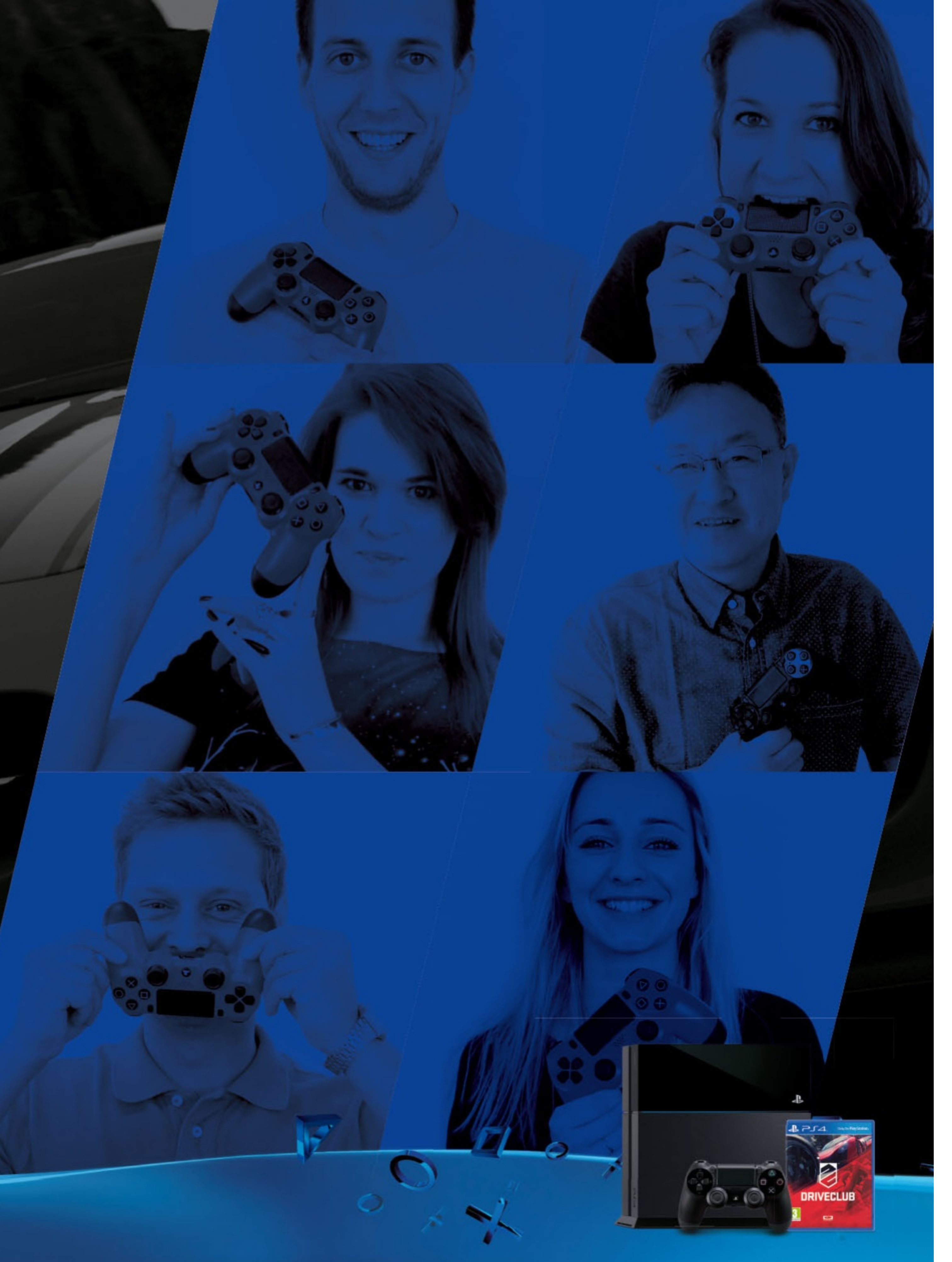
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AN AUDIENCE WITH…

VICTOR KISLYI

Wargaming's CEO talks the nobility of tanks, the importance of parties, and competing with the World Cup

By Michael Gapper

Victor Kislyi founded strategy-focused developer Wargaming in Belarus in 1998, but it wasn't until 2010 that it became a globally dominant force in its own right. The Russian launch of *World Of Tanks* on PC soon led to Kislyi embarking on a campaign of his own across the world's game media outlets, and unleashing a PR engine that appeared precision engineered to attract his target audience of "older guys". Through sheer force of will, Kislyi created an international phenomenon that today boasts 100 million registered users, an array of ports, and a companion game. He talks here about that global tour, about his competition, and about why 'free' shouldn't be a dirty word.

Had you anticipated *World Of Tanks'* success?

We made reasonable calculations and forecasts four years ago, but even the optimistic forecasts were thrown in the bin, because the real numbers were better. However, we have to be [only] moderately happy about this. It's a fast-moving world, tastes change, and the industry is changing all the time. I think the good thing about Wargaming is that we didn't sit back on our success and drink martinis on some paradise island; we kept working and, probably better than anybody else, we understand the reasons for that success. Yes, a good idea with good execution and a successful launch – all that's important. But some companies still don't understand that when you launch a free-to-play MMOG, that's when the work starts, and it gets harder and harder.

Your players consume content really fast, especially when you have [millions] of players. You start releasing updates... The challenge is that, four years later, we keep doing updates every two months. So the game is getting better and better, but [each] update is more difficult, because it's already close to perfection. But players want this new stuff; they don't just want five new tanks and one new map. They want new gameplay modes, physics, eSports, PvE... They want creative stuff, new stuff; they want to be surprised. That's the challenge for our company. When you think of a normal triple-A game, you have to update it every five or ten years.

Why tanks?

Let's be honest, this is a war machine that every boy, no matter the age, understands. It's very practical. It's simple: it's a gun, it moves like a car, it can move across rough terrain, and it has heavy armour. In some sense, philosophically, psychologically, a tank is a good representation of the noble knights of the old Medieval times. WWII tanks in particular – no homing missiles, lasers or satellite positioning – they're more noble fighters. You look your enemy literally in the eye. You have armour; he has armour. You have your war horse; he has his horse. And you have your sword and you literally clash. You manoeuvre and do tactical positioning, but at the end of the day it feels like two armoured horsemen clashing. This is noble. This is romantic, if you will. And you feel that.

Did bringing *World Of Tanks* to 360 change the way you designed the game, both in terms of the new audience and the new controller?

It was a good choice, because people who are interested in tanks are the usual suspects: guys like you and me, older than teenagers, [who] have work, kids, family... Normal guys. I think they all view WWII history and tanks in a similar way. I think for Xbox, the style of gameplay is different generally, with the distance between you and the screen and the controller. Day 1 Studios in Chicago did a fantastic job of tailoring the *World Of Tanks* concept for a specific action-shooting movie mode, so it looks and feels native on the console. [Most players] are playing on PC, because they live in Russia, Germany or Korea. But some guys don't play on PC; play time for them is about the living room and consoles. It would be stupid to expect them to convert and rush to Best Buy and buy $2,000 computers.

So it's about going where the players are?

Yes, and this is what we did. Of course, 360's installed base is shrinking for historical reasons. People are transferring to Xbox One. But right now, there are some things we still have to analyse for Xbox 360. It's a successful moneymaking project for us and, yes, it is going to undergo the same update chain as *World Of Tanks* [on PC] – there are going to be new tanks, new maps, new gameplay modes. There is no other way. You have to service the game, keep updating, otherwise it dies very quickly.

A few years ago, when *World Of Tanks* had just a few thousand players, you travelled the world visiting the press and taking your game to them. How important was that to its overall success?

I tend to believe it helped. Definitely. If something ▶







As the emblems for ***World Of Tanks***, ***Warplanes*** and the long-in-development ***Warships*** suggest, the games each have their own identity, but are also a family, with a single account destined to link them together



The meticulous, loving detail that goes into recreating *World Of Tanks*' war machines from turret to treads is part of the attraction of filling up your garage

CV

Victor Kislyi has been the CEO of Wargaming since its foundation in 1998, putting out *Massive Assault* (2003), *Domination* (2005), and *Order Of War* (2009) before its big break. After 12 years of working for publishers, it launched the free-to-play *World Of Tanks* in 2010, which rose alongside *League Of Legends* to become one of the world's most played games. Acquisitions followed, and Wargaming published *World Of Warplanes* in 2013. *World Of Warships*, focusing on WWII combat in the Pacific, is in testing. Today, Kislyi's company employs 3,500 staff in 60 locations around the world.

does not come to you, there's no place for arrogance or crying on somebody's shoulder. You just go to them. If the press does not know you, you go introduce yourself.

At both E3 and Gamescom, Wargaming has thrown particularly lavish parties for the industry. Are such events just a throwback to the old days of marketing games, or is there a business end to putting on spectacular displays?
This is a usual argument between me and people in the marketing department... Let's face it, in show business from time to time you have to do red carpet events so people notice you, otherwise you might have the best game ever but nobody [will] know about it. On the other hand, of course everybody comes and enjoys the party. [In the industry,] we all work hard during these days away from home, and it's a good place to come, have a drink, listen to some music, shake hands, smoke a cigarette. It's networking, it's being friendly, and everybody appreciates that. I don't think we're doing too much business during these parties, because they're loud, but building relationships works. However, today I would say that we have to assess our capacity. Throwing cool parties is cool, of course, but let's not forget our players expect good games, not lavish parties for business guys in Cologne. Continuing success comes at a price, and we now have to choose which direction to focus our efforts in, and this is making good games. I personally advocate less and less for those hoopla appearances. Right now, we have to go back and see how we can make our games better.

Despite all of *World Of Tanks*' achievements since its release, 'free to play' is still a phrase that's frowned upon by certain groups of players and designers. Do you think it's possible to ever win them over?
I think, in this case, preaching will probably not do the job. You have to lead by example. There are some games, especially on mobile, which have so-called 'whale monetisation'. You don't pay and you suffer, or if you're a rich guy, you can spend a lot of money to progress quickly and dominate. I tried some of those games for the sake of professional research, and some allowed me to spend thousands of dollars. In *World Of Tanks*, even if you're a very creative and passionate player, you would not spend $5,000 a month. There's not that much to buy in there, even if you played for 24 hours a day. The game by definition – and this is true for *Warships* and *Warplanes* too – is designed in a way that players will spend maybe the cost of one or two movie tickets on it, and that's it. That's the whole philosophy. [Some people] make an MMOG with a subscription, and then decide that's not cool any more and do free-to-play... No. Free-to-play has to be the whole philosophy in the design. [*World Of Tanks*] is a skill-based game. You have to fight to earn everything. Money will just help you to progress a little faster.

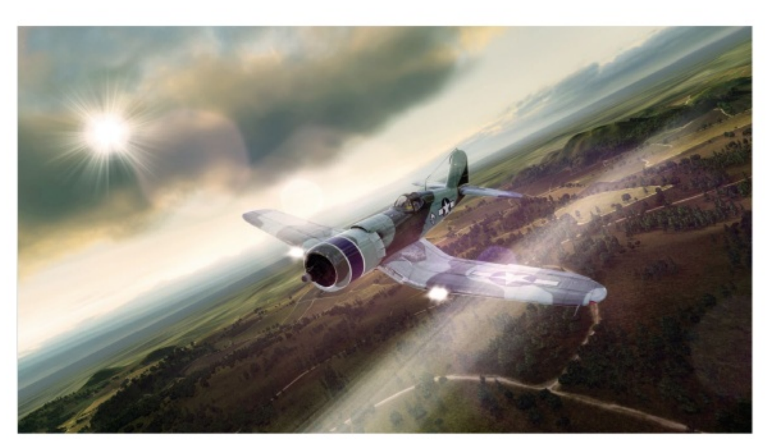
In Asia, it seems almost acceptable to focus on pay-to-win items as part of a free-to-play design template, but players in the west are much more resistant to that sort of approach. Why do you think *World Of Tanks* has proved so successful across all regions with just the one model?
Free is good anywhere. In China and Russia, every cheque is so small, but even normal guys who receive a couple of hundred dollars a month can afford $10 on their favourite game. This is a game of skills, and this is



"OUR BIGGEST ENEMY IS OUR SIZE, OUR OWN BUREAUCRACY, LOSING CREATIVITY, AND THIS IS THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE"

a very beautiful game, both on PC and now on iPad, and it's very balanced and stable. It's a good product and it really does allow you to get into the game and spend as much time as you want for free. There used to be no way to buy golden bullets [high-powered premium ammo] except with real money. Now, no – anyone can grind for more credits and just use credits. I say 'grind', but these are very enjoyable battles. I've played 13,000 games in PC *Tanks* and 1,000 [on iPad]. It's always different. It's always enjoyable. This [model] is not very traditional for mobile; usually the lifetime is short, and you have to squeeze as much money from the user as possible, not thinking about longevity. Here, we still follow our philosophy: the game has to be enjoyable for free, and people pay when they want to.

Given your position in the market, what do you view as your competition right now?
There will always be competition. Not only with games. TVs, movies, concerts, going out, drinking a pint or two: it's all time-consuming, it's all entertainment, and that consumes time by definition. So we're competing against those industries. There are so many good games that are slightly different, but so far we haven't seen any significant impact from any particular game in the longterm. When there's a new release from a big developer like Blizzard, of course everyone goes and plays it for a week or two, but then they come back. Ironically, the biggest hit we've taken, and we have it down to a science now, was the World Cup. When Germany plays, we immediately see players drop by 15 per cent in seconds. Forty-five minutes later, it goes up again; half-time ends, [the player count drops] down again. We can trace the World Cup's schedule using our games.



***World Of Warplanes* reviewed well, but has generally failed to incite the same devotion as *Tanks*, perhaps due to the less strategic feel of its dogfighting**

But our biggest competitor is ourselves. Our biggest enemy is our size, our own bureaucracy, losing creativity, and this is the biggest challenge for me and the executive team today. We realise we're a big corporation with 3,500 people, 60 locations all around the world. So it's a lot of work inside the company structure to tailor our setup so we don't lose this creativity, and we become even more creative, more productive, more agile, more flexible. We have to build a special kind of company that is ready to face all those challenges successfully.

Wargaming has gained so much in terms of money and staff, but what have you lost along the way?
When you have 20 or 60 people, you know everyone and you know birthdays and everyone's dog's name. You could grab a cup of coffee, go to a terrace and solve any problem in five minutes. Here's your art department, next door is your programming department, and here's your marketing department of one-and-a-half people. Teamwork, family-style, is very effective when you have a small group of old friends. Right now, at 3,500 people, communication is not easy. There are long distances, time differences and a lot of people in those departments. If you operate all round the world and you're doing good, big games, you have to have size. It's not possible to have 20 people do what we do. There are a lot of big, greedy, inflexible corporations. We don't want to become one.

Last year, Gaijin told us about how it was making *War Thunder* in-house and it was rather critical of Wargaming's acquisitions, saying, "We didn't buy a studio down the road and have them make our game for us." What's the strategy behind absorbing other studios rather than building from scratch?
Well, first of all, our motherland is Minsk, Belarus, and it's hard to attract a guy from California to go to Eastern Europe. Second, we have huge success in Russia and Eastern Europe, because the developers were from this region and the game is more suitable for this one. But to be more appealing to the western crowd, you have to ▶



Kislyi in his second home, posing atop a steel behemoth. He's a shrewd leader who knows how to deliver what fans want

"TIME IS WORTH MORE THAN MONEY. MULTIPLY MY 13,000 BATTLES BY A SEVEN-MINUTE AVERAGE AND THAT'S A BIG NUMBER"

have western developers. That's why *World Of Tanks: Xbox 360 Edition* is so accepted in the western market: it's made in Chicago. The technology is Australian, some basic concepts and technological pipelines are Eastern European, but the client and whatever you see and feel is done in America for the Americans.

It works well, so I think we made the right decisions two or three years ago when, as you mentioned, we grabbed some talent here and there. Unfortunately, it's not that easy. It's not an overnight return on investment and there are always cultural issues. You have to integrate people into your family, and it takes time. It takes travelling, a couple of parties, some internal summits, coming together at Gamescom or E3. You just have to be patient and you have to trust people. If you screw up once, bad news will spread very fast.

Is there ever a point as a designer of a free-to-play game where you can say, 'This game is done'?

No, that's the curse and the beauty of it. The curse is that you have to keep developing it and be more and more creative, because you're being compared with yourself. The beauty is from the business standpoint: if your game runs for 15 years, you have a core community that you don't have to spend marketing dollars to find. Again, first comes hard work and then comes this continuing longevity. Not the other way around.

Could Wargaming ever go back to a more traditional revenue model now?

Right now, we don't see that. This August, we celebrated our 16-year anniversary and there was a small party in Minsk. We made a lot of those [boxed] games, like *Massive Assault* and similar games, but times change and there are some things that disappear and don't come back, at least for us. There will always be a place for premium, triple-A, traditional, story-driven, Hollywood-style titles from big publishers, but that's a different type of business. We've seen both sides and we like what we have now. Not just money.

It's good as a designer, too. The best game developers have to put something together that people agree to pay for with their most valuable resource, which is time. Time is worth more than money. Multiply my 13,000 battles by a seven-minute average and that's a big number. More than 1,500 hours. My time is supposed to be relatively valuable, but I play. Once you have a game people will spend time on, some of them will say, "OK, here's my $20." I think maybe people think about this as a donation, in a sense. So it's how the business model works, and it pushes us and other developers to concentrate on the most important part of any game: the gameplay itself, the longevity, the idea.

Do you see Wargaming reaching beyond the military history of WWII and the *World Of...* brand?

Definitely. Never say never, right? I keep saying that times are changing, the industry is changing, technology and tastes are changing, and new devices coming out. Of course, we quite often have internal discussions and brainstorms. I have to tell you: ideas are easy. Anyone could give me ten ideas in ten seconds, but the challenge isn't to generate an idea, it's to execute the idea. Because with these things, you're talking millions of dollars of investment, a couple of years of hard work – without knowing the final result. And, again, if you're spread too thin, if you have too many projects in development, you run the risk of losing focus completely and losing concentration and failing. Right now, we have balanced the amount of games and projects and some prototypes to concentrate on, to make sure we can do this the right way. ■



The Ten Best Games Of The Generation



Representing the longest-serving console generation to date, Xbox 360, PS3 and Wii bore games that defined new high-water marks for fans and creators alike. Now, as the generation faces its sunset, fading away in cross-gen releases and scaled-down ports, we pick the ten greatest, most influential and most downright captivating examples of the lot

Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare

Publisher Activision
Developer Infinity Ward
Format 360, PS3
Release 2007

Forget how it changed everything. Forget the standards it set and the imitators it spawned. Forget how every *Call Of Duty* that followed aped it at a louder volume. Forget the tournaments and the midnight launches and the endorsements from unbearable celebrities eager to ride the hype train to young hearts. Just play it. *Call Of Duty 4* might be the best game ever to feature a gun.

COD4 puts a gun to your head in its opening moments and pulls the trigger. It's as if at every moment the game asks, 'What would players expect?' and then heads in the opposite direction. In movies, the atomic bomb never explodes, the bad guy is taken down before he can take his own life, and good guys never die; *COD4*'s campaign does the opposite, right up to the Hollywood ending.

By dragging combat down to ground level and offering players a chance to enhance their character as they grew in skill, Infinity Ward was also bold enough to challenge the wisdom that held *Halo*'s arena-style combat as the very apex of multiplayer gaming. And it's not about how those things changed every multiplayer shooter that followed; rather it's about how those features stand up today. *Modern Warfare*'s maps are the best of the series, hailing from a time before every *COD* arena was built to the same formulae; and *Modern Warfare*'s levelling system offers meaningful growth from a shallower but more measured pool than you'll find in any modern *Battlefield* or *COD*. Other military shooters would take the wrong lessons from *Modern Warfare* and go bigger, louder and faster, imitating and exaggerating rather than looking at what shooters have been, where shooters should go, and how to get them there.



And if you want to remember anything, remember how subversive it all was back in 2007, when any shooter set post-1945 was poison, and Activision did all it could to mask the move to the present day. Remember how a man rising from long grass became the defining moment of E3 2007 and how the beta test that followed proved multiplayer games could offer progression without imbalance. And remember how no developer has matched it since, then remember how many tried. Seven years later, *COD4* remains the benchmark for a shooter campaign, for competitive multiplayer, and for fearlessness in the face of an obstinate market.

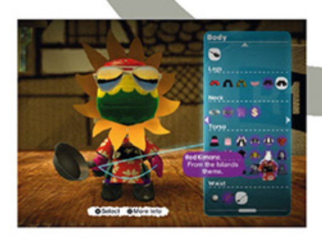
LittleBigPlanet

Publisher SCE
Developer Media Molecule
Format PS3
Release 2008

We spent countless hours perfecting The Little Big Sleep. A noir adventure presented entirely in black and white, it cast Sackboy as a criminal-turned-detective returning to his childhood home in order to seek revenge for the gang-related murder of his brother. And you thought Sony's mascot-by-proxy was cute. It was a complex construction that included scrolling opening titles, a platforming-driven rooftop dash, and even cutscenes – and all of this before *LittleBigPlanet 2* delivered more user-friendly authoring tools.

There was a high-speed car chase, too, including a Tommy Gun-wielding pursuer who crashed into a truck and exploded just as it looked as if you wouldn't be able to escape. There was even a moment where you were forced to leap off the end of a crane to avoid capture – the screen faded to black and you awoke in a hospital bed.

There was a pride in seeing the finished results, of course, but tinkering under the hood was the main draw. Our cutscenes were powered by complex arrays of pistons, sensors and switches, their timings refined over weeks of testing. The hospital transfer, meanwhile, was pulled off with a bucket on an extended piston arm, which quickly retracted when it sensed the player's presence – the bucket, made of evaporating material, disappeared when it reached its destination, depositing you in the bed as the lights came back up.



That Media Molecule offered so much creative power to players is remarkable in and of itself. But to then wrap that in an interface accessible and transparent enough to allow you to focus on design problems of your own making, rather than battling with menus and terminology, was unprecedented. Powerful level editors are a common enough feature of today's console games, but six years ago Media Molecule's proposition was a dizzying one – even when PC players were used to tools that closely resembled dev teams' own in terms of presentation and scope.

But *LittleBigPlanet*'s masterstroke was to enrich its editing environment with the same physics-based rules that described its platforming: unpause while editing and anything not stuck in place or suspended will tumble to the ground as gravity takes hold. Trigger a switch, and you'll have to rewind time to reset whatever contraption you've set in motion. It imbued what could have been an overwhelming, even dry tool with the same charm that permeated the rest of the package. Criticisms of the divisive 'floaty' platforming, or any difficulties in selecting which layer of the 2.5D world you're running along, seem churlish in the face of such profound innovation. Sackboy might not feel like Mario in motion, but it's telling that Nintendo's plumber is taking a leaf out of *LittleBigPlanet*'s scrapbook in the soon-due *Mario Maker*.

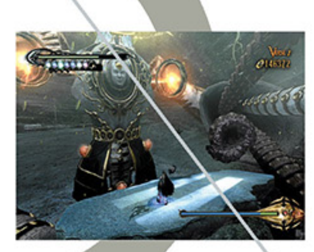
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Bayonetta

Publisher Sega
Developer PlatinumGames
Format 360, PS3
Release 2009

She may have been an unknown in 2009, but Platinum's Umbran Witch carries a substantial legacy into battle with her. Elements of *Devil May Cry*, *Ninja Gaiden* and most of Clover's back catalogue are absorbed and reconfigured into something that feels entirely fresh, dauntingly deep and yet entirely approachable. It's a luxurious cocktail that delivers the best aspects of the genre in a way that appeals to those put off by the steep learning curve of brawlers and beat 'em ups as much as it does to genre veterans. In less skilful hands, *Bayonetta*'s components could have been a cacophony, but Platinum weaves a game of exquisite balance and surprising clarity while still allowing you to stomp enemies with giant stilettos made of your own hair.

Bayonetta's vast range of moves can be practised during loading screens, the inputs you feed in listed onscreen alongside the resultant balletic flurry of attacks, but it's the organic nature of the way that you learn that really sets the game apart from its peers. Rather than having to commit combos to memory by rote, *Bayonetta*'s combat system automatically strings individual moves together in a way logical enough that you'll start predicting combos you haven't tried yet simply because they feel like they should be there.



And while it's possible to mash your way through on Normal difficulty with fairly satisfying results, start again on Hard and the game reveals its intricacy, demanding complete concentration. The brief glimmer of light from the weapon of an enemy about to attack alongside a building chime telegraphs *exactly* when to dodge out of the way, triggering a brief period of slow motion called Witch Time. But even in making its enemies' tells so explicit, Platinum doesn't make the game too easy, instead providing enough clarity for ever more complex, and spectacular, brawls.

Bayonetta's near-perfect combat system is enveloped in a deliriously imaginative world that takes in fetishistic imagery, angels with Philip Pullman-esque moral ambiguity, and a saturating layer of camp that revels in its ridiculousness. Then there's Bayonetta, surely one of the most appealing, and intriguing, leads in recent memory. But it's Platinum's willingness to put players first (bar a few self-indulgent cutscenes) and allow even beginners to feel like gods that means *Bayonetta* is just as powerful today as five years ago.

7

Super Street Fighter IV

Publisher Capcom
Developer In-house, Dimps
Format 360, PS3
Release 2010

Perhaps you've thrown a few fireballs in your time. You played *Street Fighter II* – everyone did – but you drifted away, burned by Capcom's endless iterations, the complexity rising with each new release. You heard of *Street Fighter III: Third Strike*, were one of the millions to watch Daigo's full parry in the Evo Moment #37 video, but fighting games had become a mystery.

Years later, you pick up *Super Street Fighter IV* on a nostalgic whim. You head to Arcade mode and find that, despite the vibrant, thickly inked HD overhaul, it's still *Street Fighter*. You can still throw fireballs; the time-honoured *SFII* combo – jumping heavy kick, crouching heavy kick – still works. Ryu, Ken, Guile and co are all there, along with a few new faces, and it's one of the latter camp that nearly puts the game on the trade-in pile and you off fighting games for another 15 years. Final boss Seth is a hundred times worse than M Bison ever was, with Ryu's Dragon Punch, Guile's Sonic Boom and Zangief's Spinning Piledriver – and he reads your inputs. Fifteen years ago, you'd have walked away, but a Google search reveals some strategies, and Seth falls.

You head online and play a few ranked matches. It doesn't go well, but with every defeat you learn something. One opponent Dragon Punches you when you jump at him, so you stop jumping. Another has a move that goes through your fireballs, so you stop throwing fireballs. Every match is a lesson, and you get rather a taste for it.



You learn more from Trials mode's combo challenges. You learn the difference between links and chains, Supers and Ultras, and how to work them into combos. You sense your controller is holding you back, so you order a cheap arcade stick. Soon you buy a more expensive one, and then another, just in case you have company.

You continue your studies online, first lurking on forums, then posting on them, sharing knowledge as well as taking it. You make friends there, a dozen of you meeting up once a year for fights. You pore over combo and tutorial videos on YouTube. You watch archived tournament streams, learning who the players are and who sponsors them, their histories and rivalries. You learn about match-ups between characters you have no idea how to play as. You stay up into the small hours on a school night watching the latest major tournament taking place across the world.

Eventually, you realise you've learnt not just *Street Fighter*, but every fighting game in existence. In the process, you've developed a deeper understanding of games as a whole – of the principles of good character, battle and visual design; of balance. You've learnt how to make a game that appeals equally to those who just want to throw fireballs and those like you: people for whom a game has become a hobby, an obsession, and finally a way of life. ▶

6

Red Dead Redemption

Publisher Rockstar Games
Developer In-house (Rockstar San Diego)
Format 360, PS3
Release 2010

Nobody's perfect. Certainly that's as true for *Red Dead Redemption*'s John Marston as it for Rockstar, whose lavish worlds are often a better stage than the stories set in them and the missions that drive them deserve. *Redemption* has its share of Rockstarisms, with its often clumsy controls and busywork mission design, but the whole makes it one of the greatest games of the generation.



It's the sheer vastness of it all that first grips you, just as it must have gripped the pioneers who ventured west in Marston's day. *Redemption*'s desert stretches from your boots to the horizon, with little in between. *Red Dead Redemption* is Rockstar at its bravest, turning its back on cities built for density and complexity in favour of empty space, operating in the hope that players might be struck by its scale and beauty rather than the countless people to gun down.

The sheer distances are striking, as is the absurdity of just how far the game expects you to ride without pedestrians to avoid or a radio for company. Events come and go, as bandits chase innocent miners into the desert and women feign accident only as a prelude to ambush, but *Red Dead Redemption* is largely about vast periods of nothingness punctuated by shootouts.

It hit shelves in 2010 and four years later no other blockbuster developer has been so brave as to put so much nothing onscreen and invite players to wallow in it. The formula Rockstar pioneered with *Grand Theft Auto* has been mimicked countless times, but *Redemption* is inimitable. Perhaps that's because few can match Rockstar's world building, but a more likely reason is the fragility of the mechanisms here. Each individual component – the riding, the characters, the gunplay, the sunsets, the weather – is nothing without the infinitely delicate machine Rockstar has assembled from those disparate, imperfect parts.

Remove just one piece and *Redemption* would be half the game it is today. Trifle with the Euphoria physics or lessen the snap on the guns and there would be no reason to fight. Make the big skies too big or too small and there would be no beauty on the ride to the fight in the first place. Rewrite the characters just a little and every moment in their company without the distraction of Radio Los Santos would be a misery. *Redemption* is all the game it needs to be, with no less and (almost) no more to tip the scales towards the disaster Rockstar's most famously troubled project could have been.

5

Grand Theft Auto V

Format 360, PS3
Publisher Rockstar Games
Developer In-house (Rockstar North)
Release 2013

Time moves pretty fast in *Grand Theft Auto V*, and it can take effort to step back from its breakneck storyline – and the efforts the game makes to push you through it – and try to take in the extent of Rockstar's achievements in first constructing the richest digital playground in videogame history and then bringing it to life. From the snipable birds in its skies, through the churning ocean that tips onto its seedy shores, to loyal old Chop slobbering after a ball you've accidentally hurled into a busy traffic intersection, Los Santos is the most complete, and convincing, virtual world ever constructed. And all of it achieved in the context of a modern-day setting, not some postapocalyptic world of the future where rules can be easily bent.

One playthrough isn't enough to take in all of its qualities, which is why the forthcoming enhanced edition is so much more appealing than most HD reissues. It will give you the opportunity to properly soak in the game's soundtrack, for starters. We already knew Rockstar was the best in the business when it comes to choosing tracks and DJs with which to populate fictitious radio stations, but it's only in replaying *GTAV*'s missions that you come to appreciate the complexity and power of their bespoke, dynamic score, whose rhythms do so much to achieve that age-old videogame goal of creating the sensation of playing a movie. As an exercise, switch the music off entirely and play through the heist missions again. Even something as piercingly explosive as The Paleto Score feels considerably diminished when robbed of its musical impetus.



V feels like the *GTA* Rockstar always wanted to make but couldn't quite achieve, for reasons of time, budget or the technology available at the time. It has *San Andreas*'s sense of scale but with the edges smoothed out, and *Vice City*'s energy and punch but directed with a clearer focus. Those characteristics were to be expected, but at its centre, in its three protagonists and the intertwining stories that drive them together and apart, it has something that is surprising because what once seemed like a gimmick ultimately proves to be the bedrock for the game as a whole. And at the centre of it all is Trevor Philips, the most charismatic scuzzrag to ever feature in a game, a man who somehow keeps you on side even when he's meting out horrendous brutality.

On every level, *GTAV* stepped beyond what had gone before in the series, to the extent that today, no other game studio is even daring to attempt an open-world game in its tradition because there is simply no possibility of measuring up to these standards. How much will it take to create *GTAVI*? Only Rockstar, standing on its own, has the answer.

Portal

Publisher Valve Corporation
Developer In-house
Format 360, PS3
Release 2007

Portal may have once dominated discussions because of its infamous cake, but Valve's compact puzzle-adventure deserves better. This was the game that poked holes in the firstperson shooter template, opening the way to more thoughtful uses of a perspective usually associated with death-dealing. In 2014, it's easy to forget just how subversive that was.

But *Portal*'s genius runs deeper than its space-bending navigation tool. It eases players into its complex world almost imperceptibly, teaching its mechanics in a series of puzzles that first introduce the concept of portals, then the Handheld Portal Device itself. It's testament to the brilliance of its design that wielding this gun makes you feel uncommonly powerful, like you have limitless gameplay choices, even as you are herded through the linear rat runs of sociopathic AI antagonist GLaDOS's enrichment facility experiments.

It's clear from the beginning that your volition is illusory. Portals only work on certain surfaces, and you'll pass through force fields that deactivate your gun and vaporise any objects you try to bring with you. Yet it's this carefully curated freedom, orchestrated by GLaDOS and the facility under her watchful eye, that encourages you to start testing the boundaries of your shackles. Fire a portal at the wall where a security camera is mounted and it will fall to



the ground as GLaDOS chides you. Perhaps she didn't expect you to try that, or maybe she knew you would – either way, you feel as empowered as the child that discovers its parents will pick up the food it throws across on the floor.

And it's this tension, of prisoner mentality and inter-dimensional explorer, that makes the moment when you really do catch GLaDOS out halfway through Test 16 feel all the more powerful. A couple of carelessly placed weighted storage cubes have prevented one of the wall panels from sitting flush with its neighbours, leaving a gap for you to squeeze through. The cake, the graffiti reveals, is a lie. But so too, it becomes clear, is the enrichment facility façade presented to you. And now you have something you didn't have before: a secret from GLaDOS.

Portal's dizzying perspective shifts – both narrative and physical – can make you feel queasy. But while the journey you take as you unravel its world is a carefully authored illusion, the resultant ripples that escaped the confines of Aperture Science to turn an established genre inside out were very real indeed.

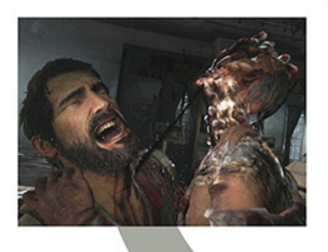
The Last Of Us

Publisher SCE
Developer Naughty Dog
Format PS3
Release 2013

Few games are acclaimed for the quality of their story without an unsaid "for a videogame" hiding behind the conversation. No such caveats for *The Last Of Us*, which spins its tale better than any linear story-driven adventure of the PS3 generation. Yet in the rush to heap praise on *The Last Of Us*'s storytelling it's easy to discount its quality as survival horror, as a stealth game and as a shooter.

That story works because the game insists players work so hard for its emotional climaxes. When Joel first shows kindness to Ellie, it's because you've been through a war together and survived. When he first puts a gun in her hand, it's because you've fought alongside her enough times to trust her with a deadly weapon. Every encounter, no matter how carefully Joel hides or how aggressively he fights, places the pair just a second or two from death, and it's that constant threat and deep-rooted dread that makes the bond that grows and the tale the game tells so credible.

And it's easy to discount what an achievement those systems are. 'Listening' for danger works in the context of a largely HUD-less adventure, while scavenging for survival tools turns the game's backgrounds into foregrounds and lets players spend more time in Ellie's company without ramming cutscene after cutscene down their throat. The lethality and awareness of the enemies inspires genuine fear, and



the combat set-pieces are thrill rides that still exist to drive Joel and Ellie's relationship forward, rather than simply fill the screen with explosions and dead bodies.

It should all be a disaster, of course. *The Last Of Us* is a 20-hour escort mission with all the potential for misery that entails, and while the game takes the occasional shortcut – Ellie is invisible to enemies until Joel blows her cover – the mechanics are consistent and Ellie becomes a firm friend, as much a narrative device a she is a videogame system in a systemic world. You understand why Joel is angry at Ellie after Tess departs from the story and why he later learns to trust her with a gun of her own, but that narrative arc is justification for leaving Joel short-handed and vulnerable for the first third of the game, and it allows Ellie to grow into the role Tess assumed in those early stages: a second gun at his side and a knife in the enemies' backs. And if the dialogue and setting tell a vivid tale, equally powerful are the moments when Ellie comes to your aid during a firefight.

As a piece of interactive storytelling, *The Last Of Us* is the culmination of everything Naughty Dog attempted in the PS3 generation and a great piece of storytelling with a full stop, rather than a "for a videogame". But its legacy is also a lesson: videogame stories are best told when the designer's hand is in concert with the writer's, not segregated from it. ▶

2

Super Mario Galaxy

Publisher Nintendo
Developer In-house
Format Wii
Release 2007

We'd have loved to have been in the design meetings. Mario butt-stomps a giant apple, and a cosmic caterpillar comes out of the other side to form a bridge to the next planet. Mario is chased by an army of Goombas across a planet-sized wooden carving of Yoshi's head that spews fire from its nostrils. Making *Mario* games must rarely feel like work, but it's still unusual to see his designers having so much fun.

Perhaps it's all to do with the setting. Transplanting Mario from terra firma to outer space meant that Tokyo EAD could throw out 20-plus years of convention and focus on what mattered. No one had to make the walls and scenery that had hemmed in our hero for two decades. There was just Mario, the mission-critical level furniture, and the infinite blackness of space.

The result is a marvellous economy of design in which barely a pixel is wasted. Planets are precisely as big or as small as they need to be; there is no fence that can't be vaulted, no tree that can't be climbed, no object placed for believability's sake. This, after all, is a game in which grabbing the stem of an outsized flower propels you across half a mile of open air. Reality has no business here.



One look at Mario and you knew that he, too, was enraptured by the change. Twirling, arms extended like aeroplane wings as he arced through space, then slamming back to solid ground, sticking his landing with gymnast perfection. Whooping as he long-jumped the circumference of a tiny planet. No wonder he was having so much fun: here, after all, was a man whose only fear was falling off the edge of the world but who'd just realised that he could walk on its underside.

It was a *Mario* game first and a Wii one second, using the Remote's features judiciously. Lesser developers would build entire games around Rolling Green Galaxy, in which players held the Remote vertically to steer Mario, teetering on a giant ball, the music speeding up and slowing down with his momentum. Yet here it was introduced, used, and promptly thrown away.

It should have been the template from which all future *Mario* games were made, but the sales of *New Super Mario Bros Wii* meant a return to terra firma, to gravity, to old ideas. This was the real New Super Mario, a fresh lease of life for gaming's oldest hero, cavorting and twirling his way through endless space.

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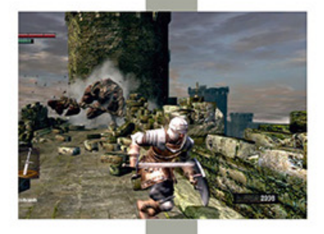
Dark Souls

Format 360, PS3
Publisher Namco Bandai
Developer FromSoftware
Release 2011

There are only two ways to play *Dark Souls*: you either bounce off it entirely or fall head over heels in love with it. The only thing preventing the former from becoming the latter is a lack of endurance, and we don't mean the in-game stat of the same name. We've yet to meet a single player for whom persistence has not been enough to transform apathy into all-consuming love.

So much has been said and written about FromSoftware's masterpiece since its release, and much of it in these pages, so forgive us for telling a simple story. In the original, unpatched version of the game, curses stacked. These days, if you get caught in the gassy cloud spat out by the frog-like Basilisks in the Depths, your maximum health is halved, but any repeat of that mistake goes unpunished. Previously, your vitality would halve again, and again, and so our reviewer was left running helplessly around the most intimidating videogame world ever created with a health bar one-eighth its usual size. As one of the first couple of dozen people in the world to play the game outside of its developer's Tokyo offices, their only guiding hand came from an email chain of fellow writers – in theory a live-blogged walkthrough, but in practice a support group for sufferers of post-traumatic stress.

It was not merely professional obligation that compelled our reviewer to struggle on regardless, spending two days and nights trying to reach the Undead Church, where Oswald Of Carim awaited to offer purging stones that would restore their vitality gauge. To play *Dark Souls* is to be consumed by it, to obsess about reaching the next blind corner and finding what waits around it, and every failure along the way makes for a story worth telling. And tell them you will, because the only thing that comes close to playing *Dark Souls* is talking about it – the build discussions, the boss strategy debates, the coded, spoiler-free guidance to Lordran newcomers. Dozens of **Edge** staffers' evenings have been lost to playing the game, and many more man hours to the following mornings' debriefings.



It is most readily described as an action-RPG, but in truth *Dark Souls* is the everygame. Lordran's corkscrewing sprawl makes the game a peerless adventure, each level layout a puzzle-platformer. To melee players, it is the purest sort of fighting game; to magic users, almost a shooter. It has the fixed enemy placement memory test of a scrolling shoot 'em up, and the harsh punishment of a roguelike. On top of all that sits an RPG structure that affords staggering flexibility, enough for a dozen different playthroughs, the thrill somehow never fading with familiarity. Little wonder that, after *Dark Souls*, most other games feel facile. It is, without doubt, the greatest work of gaming's greatest generation to date. Somehow that still doesn't feel like praise enough.

PRESS X TO JASON

Heavy Rain

Format PS3 **Publisher** SCE
Developer Quantic Dream

The DualShock's X button: selector of a million menu options, performer of thousands of jumps, swiper of countless swords. We've always suspected David Cage would rather be making films than games, and in *Heavy Rain* he made his issues with the medium clear by reducing the pad's most important button to making Ethan Mars awkwardly shout his son's name across a busy mall.

ICE TO SEE YOU

Batman: Arkham City

Format 360, PS3 **Publisher** Warner Bros
Developer Rocksteady

Arkham's Batman is pure predator, able to clear a room of goons in seconds. So the Mr Freeze fight, where each tactic works only once, comes as a bucket of ice water right to the empowerment fantasy. In a stroke, you're forced to think about your tools, and the world, in ways you never have. But you'll never feel more like the Dark Knight than when brains triumph over muscle memory.

STAIRWAY SLIDESHOW

Ninja Gaiden II

Format 360 **Publisher** Microsoft
Developer Team Ninja

Late on in Tomonobu Itagaki's 360 brawler, Ryu Hayabusa climbs a long staircase. A dozen ninjas arrive; he cuts a swathe through them and more appear. Then more, and more, until the engine gives out and the framerate plummets, every animation frame visible in lustrous slow-mo. It's a scene worthy of a Hong Kong action flick, but Microsoft disagreed, reducing the enemy count in a patch.

QUIET NIGHT IN

The Darkness

Format 360, PS3 **Publisher** 2K
Developer Starbreeze Studios

Most devs think decisions can only be meaningful if they have direct consequences, so it takes bravery to offer a choice that seems mundane, and mastery to make it pay off. Lead Jackie and girlfriend Jenny sit watching a film, and she dozes off. Do you move and risk waking her, or let her sleep? Just asking that helped portray a serious relationship, making Jenny's murder later harder to take.

10 ten standout moments

A grab bag of things that – for good and bad – will stay with us

COLOUR THERAPY

Silent Hill: Shattered Memories

Format PS2, PSP, Wii **Publisher** Konami
Developer Climax Studios

Climax's survival horror smartly broke up its action with scenes of the protagonist convalescing in a therapist's office years on. After the first frantic escape from a grotesque, creeping threat, you're back on the couch. You're given a drawing of a happy family scene, and can use the Wii Remote to colour it in, your pulse slowly returning to normal as you focus on not going over the lines.

ONE HOT MINUTE

Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved

Format 360 **Publisher** Microsoft
Developer Bizarre Creations

In a game whose objective is to kill things without being killed, *Retro Evolved*'s Pacifism achievement, which tasked you with staying alive for 60 seconds without firing a shot, was a subversive masterstroke. A minute has never felt so long, though perhaps that's because it took us an evening to do it. How unfortunate that in 2014 achievement design still focuses on progression and grinding.

BANDING TOGETHER

Rock Band

Format 360, PS2, PS3, Wii **Publisher** EA
Developer Harmonix

We'll never forget the pitying looks as we lugged a box of plastic instruments home on the train, but our first 24 hours with *Rock Band* will linger in the memory for other reasons. This was a real event, with friends of wildly varying skill levels summoned for a night of good drinking, so-so drumming and singing so bad the neighbours came round to complain, but ended up joining in.

GEARS OF A CLOWN

Gears Of War 2

Format 360 **Publisher** Microsoft
Developer Epic Games

Who says a gruff, broad-shouldered soldier, sketched into life for the sole purpose of shooting and swearing his way through an endless stream of bullet-sponges, can't do emotion? Ah, yes. Everyone. Dom's reaction to finding his wife, Maria, at death's door is to say "no" ten times, look a bit sad and apologise before doing the only thing he's ever been any good at: shooting things in the head.

FOREVER ALONE

Journey

Format PS3 **Publisher** SCE
Developer Thatgamecompany

Its widespread influence proves the power of *Journey*'s seamless multiplayer, but none of the many that have taken its lead have retained its capacity for heartbreak. With our anonymous partner, we sand-surfed at sunset, skipped singing through the desert. Then we lost sight of them during the final ascent up a wintry mountain. We waited and waited, to no avail, before pressing on alone.

A QUESTION OF SPORT

Wii Sports

Format Wii **Publisher** Nintendo
Developer In-house

"But what does this button do?" Nothing, Mum. Say what you want about where *Wii Sports* took Nintendo: there have been few moments in games so transformative as the time you handed a Remote to a non-gaming relative, and told them to just play tennis. It felt like games had finally learned how to enthral old and young alike, and they had; these days, Mum plays *Candy Crush*.

B O O K O F

16 -

G E N E S I S

BIT

In this exclusive extract from Read-Only Memory's Sega Genesis/Mega Drive: Collected Works, we follow how Sega turned its 16bit hardware into America's coolest videogame console

By Keith Stuart

"Genesis was the 16bit system. And there was a line drawn in the sand between it and the NES"

September 1990. A TV ad is screened coast to coast in the USA, showing clips of *Super Monaco GP*, *Joe Montana Football* and *Moonwalker*, the voiceover proclaiming the awesome power of Sega's Genesis. Sega Of America president **Michael Katz** had set out his stall in style: the Genesis represented the birth of a powerful new vision of gaming, so it didn't need to compete directly with the outdated NES; the console had its own, original games that gave modern gamers something different. And this message was encapsulated perfectly by the ad's ending – a single slogan suggested in a meeting one afternoon by a copywriter at Bozell, a slogan that would resonate throughout the '90s and fundamentally alter game industry sensibilities: "Genesis does what Nintendon't."

It was about attitude – Sega wasn't Nintendo, and it didn't want to be. Nintendo didn't do licensed sports sims. Nintendo didn't do violence. Nintendo didn't have Michael Jackson. Sega did. "With this kind of advertising, you need the ammunition," says Katz today. "There were three things that we learned in the packaged-goods days at Lever Brothers: your marketing claim has to be unique, meaningful and believable. That is the test I have always applied."

And so the first shots in the console war had been fired. Sega's director of marketing, **Al Nilsen**, relished the fight. One of the first members of staff to be recruited to Sega Of America, he oversaw the launch of the Genesis, and then observed the arrival of NEC's 8/16bit hybrid, the TurboGrafx-16 – known as the PC Engine in Japan – just weeks later. "We vanquished NEC first," he recalls with barely disguised zeal. "They were virtually out of the running by that Christmas – their retail distribution had started to dry up. Genesis was the 16bit system. And there was a line drawn in the sand between it and the NES."

This isn't quite how Sega Of Japan had planned to win the console war when it started building the Mega Drive in the summer of 1986. The company was a hugely successful coin-op manufacturer and arcade owner, but had recognised from the early 1980s that the key battleground ahead lay in people's homes – and it calculated that arcade conversions would be its Trojan horse. "After the first generation of consoles – the ColecoVision, Magnavox, Atari 2600 – Sega began contemplating the console market," says **Hayao Nakayama**, the president of Sega Enterprises from 1984 to 1999, and the man who wielded the most power during the rise of the Mega Drive.

"In order to expand the business rapidly, the company put out the SG-1000 cartridge-based game console simultaneously with the SC-3000, which was a cartridge-based computer like the MSX. Sega also released a selection of handheld LCD games similar to Game & Watch. Nintendo was building up its business in the Japanese market – it was a well-established game company with a huge share of the console market. We knew this was our main rival. So the Sega Mark III was put on the Japanese market as a competitor to the Famicom."

But the Mark III – renamed the Master System in the west – never got close to overturning Nintendo's huge market share, which proved a tough shell to penetrate thanks to the company's exclusivity deals that locked giants such as Capcom, Konami and Namco into NES development. "We did not have killer games. Activision and Parker Brothers were our only thirdparty developers," Nakayama concedes. "Also, we were not familiar with the consumer business or the distribution and marketing of consumer products – unlike Nintendo."

Nakayama realised he had to exploit Sega's key strength: the quality of its arcade games. Steered by legendary game designers Yu Suzuki and Makoto Uchida, Sega was cranking out hits like *Hang-On*, *Space Harrier* and *Altered Beast*, ensuring the company's dominance in the profitable racing, shooting and fighting genres. Together with R&D director Hideki Sato, Nakayama envisioned a console with the power to replicate the arcade experience in the home. "We believed we could win the battle as we had good games and a strong technology background cultivated in the arcade industry," says Nakayama. "However, an 8bit console did not have enough capacity to run our arcade titles."

The plan stirred up resistance from within the old guard, provoking a fear similar to that once held by movie companies concerned about the arrival of television. "The executives and the staff who took care of the arcade business objected to entering the console business," says Nakayama. "They thought it would lead to a decrease in interest for arcade games. However, they finally agreed to develop the Mega Drive. ▶



Inelegant English it may be, but this ad demonstrated how Sega came out swinging against the dominant power in the US market at the time. In just a few words, it laid claim to a more edgy, clued-in audience than its key rival



External design agency IDEO was hired to create concepts for Sega's planned foray into VR headsets. The team was inspired by the 1951 flick The Day The Earth Stood Still, and also referenced Star Trek: The Next Generation (see below)





These Control Pad concepts highlight the consistency of Sega's drive towards an ergonomic curved shape and fanned button placement



John Short

Released only in Japan, the Mega-CD Karaoke addon (above) supported up to two microphones, and had key control and echo features. It plugged via a stereo cable into a Mega-CD, which could play both CDs and CD+Gs





Q&A: MITSUSHIGE SHIRAIWA

Case design: Mega Drive, Saturn, Dreamcast

In what way did the technical features of the console influence your designs?
As I remember, the performance and board specifications for the Mega Drive had been decided about a year before I started. The performance of the Mega Drive was exceptional for a home console at the time, so we looked to select a design that would express that characteristic. The name Mega Drive was intended to symbolise power and speed, but I wanted to create a design that would also represent the console's ability to entertain, thrill and excite.

Was the idea behind the Mega Drive's more sophisticated look to deliberately appeal to an older audience?
Other console designs like the Master System were more chunky and toy-like. The Nintendo Famicom, for example, was aimed at children, but Sega wanted to create a videogame console that would be enjoyed by a wide range of people.

How did you decide on the console's defining cosmetic features – its colour scheme, or the distinctive circular area around the cartridge port?
Although we did consider using other colours, we knew that Sega's followers sought coolness, so we went with black – it became known as 'Sega Black' by its fans.
The circular design on top represents an idea that the Mega Drive is expanding the world of entertainment. We also wanted to develop a design that imitated audio equipment. [The '16bit' motif] was meant to draw attention to the Mega Drive's superior performance. It was designed to be like an emblem on a car.

We knew the US console market was huge and, from the beginning, our aim was to break Nintendo's stranglehold in America."

Most of the arcade titles of the day were running on a single piece of hardware – the System 16 board, 16bit technology that utilised Motorola's 68000 microprocessor. Sato knew that if the chipset could be manufactured cheaply enough, it could form the basis of a new kind of home console, capable of accurately replicating the company's current arcade hits. Unfortunately, that new home console faced difficult beginnings.

"I came up with 'Genesis' because I felt this would be a new beginning for Sega"

The Japanese launch of the Mega Drive was low-key and poorly timed, coming just a week after the release of the NES title *Super Mario Bros 3* – one of the most significant games of the decade. There was also much stronger domestic competition from NEC's PC Engine. Although the console, repackaged as the TurboGrafx-16, bombed in America, NEC wouldn't be so summarily dispatched on its home turf. And all the while, Nintendo's Super Famicom lurked on the horizon. With a release date in Japan set for the following November, there was little room for manoeuvre.

Nakayama recognised the weaknesses of his console in the Japanese market, but saw the wider opportunities: "The Mega Drive was far inferior to the NES in terms of diffusion rate and sales in the Japanese market, though there were ardent Sega users. But in the US and Europe, we knew Sega could challenge Nintendo. We also put Brazil, Russia and even China in our sights as international markets. Then we set about developing killer games."

Sega had to think globally; it had to speak to gamers in their own territories. In the past, the company had been uncertain about operating outside of Japan – which is why the North American distribution rights to the Master System were handed over to the Minnesota-based toy giant Tonka. For a while, Sega was thinking of pursuing the same tactic with the Genesis. "Nakayama had considered Matchbox, he'd considered Mattel, and they turned him down," recalls **Tom Kalinske**, CEO of Sega Of America from 1990 to 1996. "He may well have gone to Atari, but by then Atari was so weak it would have been a disaster."

But if North America was to be the key battleground for the Genesis, it was clear that Sega would need a far stronger US presence, and there was one man in the company who could make this happen: **David Rosen**, the company's co-founder. Stationed in Japan as an airman during the Korean War, the young entrepreneur had set up his own business importing photo booths from the US. This graduated to pinball tables and early electromechanical arcade games. In 1966, Sega produced its first original game, *Periscope*, which Rosen designed. Rosen established and became chairman of Sega Of America, and it was he who steered the Mega Drive project to its US launch in June 1989. Rosen was also responsible for renaming the machine for the American market. "I came up with the name 'Genesis' because I felt this would be a new beginning for Sega," he explains. "At first, the Japanese management didn't care for the word, but I insisted on it."

"With the Genesis, we were entering a whole new era," he says. "The Master System was not as successful as we would have liked – Nintendo was very well entrenched. When the deal with Tonka came up for renewal, they weren't interested because of the prices we were charging for the cartridges and the consoles. No one was interested once they got into the numbers. They realised we would be taking a markup in Japan, thereby leaving minimal profits in the US."

So the impetus shifted to strengthening Sega Of America, then effectively a support outpost. Rosen wanted an industry insider as the company's first president and turned to Michael Katz, who had headed up the US games division at Atari and therefore knew both the business and American consumers. "I had survived three-and-a-half years with Jack Tramiel and his sons at Atari," he laughs. "I'd never taken more than two weeks off in a year and I wanted a sabbatical from the industry. A few months after I got back from travelling, I was approached by David Rosen. I knew David, having met him a few times previously; he asked if I wanted to be the first formal head of Sega in the US, to build the organisation and work on the establishment of Genesis."



The Genesis was powered by a Motorola 68000 CPU and a secondary Zilog Z80 processor. Despite having a palette of 512 colours, it could only display 64 onscreen at once and was limited to 80 sprites at a time. In 1994, the 32X addon would expand the console's capabilities, allowing for 32,768 colours and modest support for polygon-based graphics, before Sega shifted its focus to the 32bit Saturn

To head up product development, Katz brought in Ken Balthaser, a veteran of Epyx and Atari, with instructions to broaden Sega's range of titles in a bid to meet western demands. Instead of hiring coders and artists and setting up an expensive in-house studio, he sought producers who could work with established developers in North America and Europe. This is when the true fightback started. Just weeks after Genesis

Q&A: NORIYOSHI OHBA

Producer/director: *Super Wonder Boy, The Revenge Of Shinobi, Streets Of Rage 1, 2* and *3, Skies Of Arcadia*

What were the key technical challenges you encountered working on the Mega Drive?
The Mega Drive was cutting edge at that time; the Master System was far more challenging. I would say the hardest thing about developing on the Mega Drive was finding ways to maximise its potential.

Perhaps your most well-known Sega games are the *Bare Knuckle/Streets Of Rage* series – where did the idea originate?
After the development of *The Super Shinobi* was complete, I discussed with Yuzo Koshiro some ideas for making a street karate game. We looked at titles such as *Double Dragon* and *Final Fight* and used detective TV shows like Starsky & Hutch and The A-Team for reference – then we proceeded to create the concept for *Bare Knuckle*.

Why do you think *Streets Of Rage* worked so well?
What I cared about most was the combat system – its strategic elements and how it felt to play. The basic concept of the enemies is simple – they move around in order to surround the player – so the key is for the player to move in such a way to avoid this.

Why didn't Adam make it into *Streets Of Rage 2* as a playable character?
I wanted to increase the variety of actions, so I added a character with power, Max, and a character with speed, Sammy. However, due to the memory capacity of the game, only four playable characters could be included. Because Axel and Adam are similar, we decided to cut Adam.

launched in the US, the strategy was locked in: produce a batch of cool, celebrity-endorsed sports sims to stand beside the blisteringly effective arcade conversions.

But there was far more to this move than simply image and positioning. The Motorola 68000 microprocessor was ubiquitous in the industry, already powering the Commodore Amiga and Atari ST, so coders were on familiar ground – and they could redeploy code they'd already written. This proved especially important when Michael Katz was looking to quickly line up a library of western-developed titles. Electronic Arts, formed in 1982 by **Trip Hawkins** and by now a major force in game development, was an obvious partner. And, as Hawkins recalls, EA was ready.

"We had a lot of existing intellectual property – things like *Marble Madness* – as well as new games like *Populous* and all the EA Sports products. Many of them had already been executed in a 16bit, 68000 version, usually for the Amiga. Transitioning that value onto the Genesis was easy. We developed 20 Genesis titles in the first year, and were racking up profits. Between 1990 and 1992, the total market value of EA went from $60 million to $2 billion. A lot of people rightly believe that had EA not been there, Sega would not have ended up with half the 16bit market."

Hawkins originally objected to the restrictive console business model, which involved Sega manufacturing all game cartridges and charging publishers up to $10 per copy. EA reverse-engineered the technology and threatened to produce its own cartridges unless Sega reduced the costs. It did, and a relationship began. As a result, EA was ready to step in when Sega's *Joe Montana* game – its killer app for the vital Christmas 1990 season – hit trouble. Sega had employed developer Mediagenic to produce the game, but with a few months to go, it was apparent the studio would miss its deadline. Katz knew who to call.

"Sega phoned and they were panicking," says Hawkins. "They said, 'Our *Montana* game is not going to get done on time. You need to be a team player; you need to rescue Christmas for the Genesis.' They wanted me to abandon our own *Madden* title and reframe it as *Montana*. My attitude was, 'Are you kidding? We're going to build a great company around *Madden* – I'm going to double-dip and do both.' I went back to Sega and said, 'Write me a cheque for $2 million and in six weeks we'll give you your game.' And that's what we did. Both games came out and they were two of the top-selling titles that Christmas. Everyone was happy."

Shinobu Toyoda, then executive VP of Sega Of America, reveals further intricacies of those negotiations: "This was a wild moment in games history. I still recall Sega agreed to pay a 24 per cent royalty to EA for *Joe Montana*. In those days, the developer royalty was usually five per cent. And we agreed to give EA 16 release slots a year for its games – Sega usually only allowed thirdparty publishers four. So EA said, 'OK then, we will give you the sports games as Genesis exclusives; they won't be on SNES.' We agreed. We said, 'Let's form a partnership and beat Nintendo together.'"

The *Madden/Montana* dichotomy perfectly symbolised the Genesis proposition: the former was a serious sim aimed at scholars of the sport; the latter an arcade-style romp with intuitive controls and brash visuals. The console straddled both worlds: it was aspirational and fun; it wasn't a toy, it was a serious piece of kit. The tactic worked. *Joe Montana Football* was a hit, and the future of the *Madden* franchise, which would go on to sell over 100 million units, was secured. Crucially, older kids were starting to take notice. As Katz recalls, "The sports titles brought in a broader audience, an older age demographic than Nintendo's – they definitely appealed to teenagers and young adults." The thinking was smart and timely: Nintendo may have had the family market sewn up, but Sega had its sights set on a vast untapped audience, hungry for a new breed of game.

With the strategy in place, what Sega needed was an icon that embodied its bold new values. That icon – which would come to exemplify the Mega Drive's particular blend of attitude and bravado – was Sonic The Hedgehog. With the Super Nintendo launch looming, *Phantasy Star* veteran Naoto Ohshima had already started work on an offbeat animal character with programmer **Yuji Naka**. "We initially chose a rabbit... and then experimented with further ideas – an armadillo and a hedgehog," says Naka. "Ohshima-san's hedgehog illustration was very stylish and best represented the speedy qualities we were looking for."

But the speed – Sonic's defining characteristic – came from Naka. An accomplished programmer and avid motorsport fan, he also understood the strengths of the Mega ▶

Drive hardware, utilising these skills to accelerate the animation to a lightning-fast pace. Working alongside Ohshima, Naka's initial vision was for an action game in which players traversed through the game world in a similar way to his recently completed Mega Drive conversion of *Ghouls 'N Ghosts*, but sped up. "So the very first part of the program that I finished," says Naka, "was the smooth, high-speed running action that later became the most iconic aspect of the *Sonic* games."

The game unwittingly encapsulated Sega's emerging message: brash visuals, impatience, speed. But it didn't come together at once. When early versions of the code made it across to the US, development staff were initially sceptical. "One day we got this... I guess you'd call it an alpha copy of a game named *Sonic*," says **Craig Stitt**, an artist who joined Sega Technical Institute – the company's Palo Alto-based studio – just as work was beginning on *Chameleon Kid/Kid Chameleon*. He recalls: "We'd never heard of it. We went into the game room, stuck it in, played it, and it really wasn't very fun. It was beautiful, but you ran around for a few minutes and then you handed the controller off to somebody else and went back to work. A month or two later, we got what I'm assuming was the beta version. In this one, when *Sonic* got hit, the rings flew and scattered. The game became addictive. Suddenly, you couldn't stop playing. You were fighting over who got the controller. It made that much difference!"

"When we heard the Japanese were developing a game based on a hedgehog, we almost croaked"

Then-president Michael Katz remained unconvinced, even to the end. "When we heard the Japanese were developing a game based on a hedgehog, we almost croaked," he laughs. "Nobody even knew what a hedgehog was!" Katz wasn't around long enough to find out, and Mattel veteran Kalinske was sold. The marketing ramped up and *Sonic* went live at the 1991 Summer Consumer Electronics Show, the same event at which Nintendo revealed the SNES to the US. Al Nilsen recalls: "On the first day after the Nintendo press conference, a reporter from a major national magazine came over to me and said, 'The Super Nintendo has 32,768 colours; you only have 512. What are you going to do about it?' I just got him to follow me to our booth, showed him *Sonic* and *Mario* running side by side and said, 'OK, which one has the most colours? It's not how many colours you have, it's what you do with them.'"

Released in the US on June 23 – a full month before its launch in Japan – *Sonic* was a smash. Everyone understood this was something new and important. "Sonic has thrown down the gauntlet to Mario in a big way," C&VG wrote in its ecstatic review. "Everyone's favourite Italian plumber must be feeling just a little washed out."

Inspired, Kalinske went over to Sega Of Japan and announced his plan to bundle *Sonic* with the Genesis, while reducing the price of the console to $149. The response was explosive. "The Japanese board thought I was nuts," says Kalinske. "They said, 'My God, we don't make any money on the hardware as it is. If we give away the best title, you're taking the software profit away. It's crazy!'" But Nakayama remembers the ambition of Kalinske's proposition. "At that time, the software buying rate in the US was, on average, three games to one piece of hardware," he says. "But Sega Of America believed that even if we sold the unit with *Sonic* under cost price, they could cover the loss and make a profit on future sales of software." It was the loss-leader philosophy taken to its very extreme.

The room descended into chaos. But Kalinske stuck to his guns: "The board members were all talking in Japanese. [Executive vice president of Sega Of America, Shinobu] Toyoda was trying to translate for me as fast as he could, but he couldn't keep up with all the banter going on. And then Nakayama got up and kicked a chair over... He was angry that everyone else in the room was so negative at what I was proposing. At the end of the meeting, as Nakayama was walking out of the door, he turned and said to everybody, 'I don't care what you say. I hired this guy to make changes in the US. I promised him a free hand, so we're going along with him.' He was very clear. He might have been surprised at the things I wanted to do, but he wasn't angry at me. Nakayama overruled them all. And that was the end of the meeting."



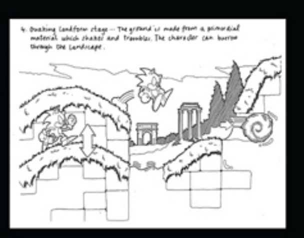
Sega Mega Drive/Genesis: Collected Works is the definitive work on Sega's landmark console, featuring the history of Sega's Mega Drive told in its creators' words, plus interviews with Sega developers from the era and design documents from Sega's archives reproduced for the first time. Published by Read-Only Memory, the 352-page volume is available now for £35 from readonlymemory.vg

The decision resulted in a huge boost in sales, with 15 million units of the *Sonic* bundle sold. The Genesis, with *Sonic* leading the charge, hadn't just captured the teen market, it had captured the zeitgeist. The machine was speaking to a generation that had grown up with MTV, a generation raised on jump cuts and dislocated narratives. This was the era of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and Garbage Pail Kids, of casual surreality and postmodern mania. For these kids, the Genesis was now an aspirational product that measured up to the teen generation's universal yardstick – it was cool. ■



Sonic The Hedgehog's original design doc includes a metallic stage with a Southeast Asian feel, familiar blue skies and green hills, plus the abilities to burrow and skim across water, the latter feature making it into *Sonic 2*















Treasure's design doc for *Gunstar Heroes* has descriptions alongside its visual designs, with Blue labelled "a typical foul-mouthed partner". Pink, meanwhile, has henchmen because she "doesn't like to work"



Q&A: YUJI NAKA

Creator:* *Phantasy Star, Sonic The Hedgehog, Nights, Burning Rangers, Chu Chu Rocket

Was your first Sega project really a dating simulation?
It was. We were asked to create a game that would appeal to girls, [and] it was only meant to be for training, but the game became popular among staff and the decision was made to release it commercially. Over the next two months, we explored ways to make it more fun. It was a good experience, though I don't think it was a particularly good game in the end.

Were any elements of the first *Sonic* game particularly difficult to execute?
Since *Sonic* can run so quickly, I had to create level maps several times wider than the norm and was very careful to ensure the player would not get lost. It took me almost a year to finish Act 1 of Green Hill Zone after repeatedly creating and destroying it. I found the process of creating and destroying very interesting.

The mythical 'lost' levels still attract much speculation from *Sonic* fans. Were any other notable ideas abandoned during the process?
There was a scene [in the first *Sonic*] in which a Sonic band would appear and play, and Sonic would breakdance, and even though the graphics had been created, we had to abandon it to meet our deadline. It meant we suddenly had a bit of spare capacity left over, so we decided to add a "Seee–gaaa" voice sample when the game begins, which in hindsight was a very good decision.

THE MAKING OF...



WOLFENSTEIN: THE NEW ORDER

How MachineGames' major revamp of Blazkowicz's world also led to an overhaul of the floundering studio's fortunes

By Edward Lewis

Format 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One
Publisher Bethesda Softworks
Developer MachineGames
Origin Sweden
Release 2014

Jens Matthies had to get a loan. Had to. It was the middle of 2009 and he'd tended his resignation at the Stockholm-based Starbreeze. Matthies joined the studio in 1999, and was one of the original members of the company, but after a Jason Bourne tie-in was cancelled and as a muddled reboot of *Syndicate* progressed, he felt it was time to move on.

He wasn't alone – Fredrik Ljungdahl, Jerk Gustafsson and four others who'd been on the ground floor at Starbreeze had quit along with him, and were all in the process of taking out sizeable loans. The idea was to combine their resources and found a new studio; they just had to do it before the bank realised they were all about to become unemployed.

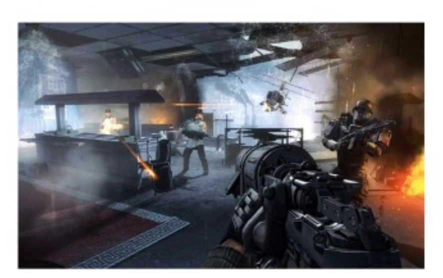
"It was scary," Matthies says. "I was leaving Starbreeze with almost no money saved up and if the bank knew that soon I wasn't going to have a job, I never would have got the loan."

It took some convincing, but Matthies, Gustafsson, Ljundahl and the rest eventually secured their capital and were ready to set up shop. They found offices in Uppsala, about an hour's drive from Sweden's capital, and called themselves MachineGames, all one word, to reflect their mix of efficiency and playfulness. But still, the company had no staff, no production contract, and very little cash. Life for Matthies was about to get hard.

"I didn't know when a game deal was going to come in. It was depressing a lot of the time," he says. MachineGames worked up a handful of concepts, mostly shooters in the vein of titles like *The Darkness* and *Syndicate*, but nothing gained traction, and 12 months after it was founded, MachineGames was facing ruin. "By the summer in 2010, I was a few weeks away from having to sell my apartment," Matthies says.

A meeting was set up with ZeniMax Media, the American parent company that had purchased id Software, owner of the *Wolfenstein* IP. The directors at Machine asked if anyone was working on a *Wolfenstein* title. ZeniMax said no. Before the end of the summer, the Swedish startup submitted its pitch.

"We wanted to make a drastic step forward but also honour what *Wolfenstein* was," Matthies explains. "The series hadn't leaned much on story in the past, but we'd always felt firstperson games were the most immersive, so with the *Wolfenstein* IP we had a real chance to do something new."



Destructible environments, surprisingly intelligent AI, and a fantastically flexible cover system combine to make *Wolfenstein*'s battles frantic, desperate, but always fun

"We took a gamble pitching our vision for *Wolfenstein*," senior gameplay designer **Andreas Ojerfors** says. "We were all *Wolfenstein* fans, and we wanted to do a tribute to a game that had influenced us, but at the same time, we had a new spin to put on it. I think the pitch worked for two reasons. First, the setting. We were asking the question 'What would happen if the Nazis had won the war?', something a *Wolfenstein* game hadn't done before. Second, we had this mix of story, action and stealth. It was very varied in terms of gameplay."

"WE WANTED TO DO A TRIBUTE TO A GAME THAT HAD INFLUENCED US, BUT WE HAD A NEW SPIN TO PUT ON IT"

ZeniMax was impressed and handed MachineGames a publishing contract with its subsidiary, *Skyrim* developer Bethesda Softworks. It was a perfect match. Soon, MachineGames was part of the ZeniMax family. "ZeniMax was a top pick because it's so quality orientated," Matthies says. "The mindset there is totally geared towards creativity. When we started Machine we saw it as an independent studio, but after pitching *Wolfenstein*, ZeniMax invited us to join its organisation and it just made sense."

Now backed by Bethesda, MachineGames started work on *Wolfenstein* immediately. The team spent three weeks at id's headquarters in Richardson, Texas, getting to grips with the franchise's history and throwing around ideas. "Id had a lot of information about the lore and characters," Matthies explains, "so we went there and basically stole one of their conference rooms. Every time we thought we had a strong idea we'd bring the id guys in and pitch what we were thinking. Fortunately, they had a very similar vision to us."

By the time the team arrived back in Sweden, they had a completed design document for what would become *Wolfenstein: The New Order*. Development on the game began in October 2010, just a few months after the pitch had been accepted. However, as a company, MachineGames was still finding its feet.

"I arrived in 2011," narrative designer **Tommy Tordsson** says, "and even then it was a bare-bones crew. The offices were being renovated, there were holes in the floor, workmen were hammering and drilling. It was chaotic. But still I wanted to work there. It was mostly because of the other guys, Jens, Fredrick and Jerk. They had a creative ambition that I thought was really lacking in Starbreeze by the time I left."

As well as getting the building ready, MachineGames had to ramp up its recruitment drive: it needed smart, experienced self-starters who could understand the company's vision. On top of the seven founders, dozens of staffers were added to MachineGames' ranks.

Matthies says: "It was very stressful because we were working out the game, negotiating with Bethesda and recruiting our team all at the same time. We know people are 99 per cent of what matters. It's the most important thing when you build a game studio."

"Our organisation is very flat," Ojerfors says. "The directors own the vision but we're all responsible for creating our part of the game. We work in what we call 'pods', small units that are responsible from start to finish for one part of the game. They contain scripters, level designers, gameplay designers – representatives of all the professions we need to create a game. So the people that were hired all had to be senior or at least very skilled, people who could be mature and take responsibility."

"Aside from recruitment," Matthies says, "we tried to do everything the right way, from where the office was located to how the floor plan was laid out. We made a lot of difference by doing those things correctly."

ZeniMax policy means MachineGames can't reveal exactly how many people worked on *The New Order*, but Ojerfors says there were always limits in place. The studio had a vision it didn't want to lose sight of. "We made a decision very early on not to do a multiplayer mode in *The New Order*. We didn't want Machine to bloat into an enormous studio – it was better to stay at this smaller size and put all our energy into making just one thing, and making it the best we could. Multiplayer would have meant hiring more people in. It would have made the culture here implode."

Once the team size was set and everyone was divided into pods, *The New Order* finally started to take shape, and MachineGames began working with id Tech 5, the engine built by John Carmack, one of the co-creators of *Wolfenstein 3D*. Id Tech 5's so-called MegaTexture feature proved vital to MachineGames' vision, allowing the team's level designers to stream visual data as levels progressed, giving them lots of storage space to work with. The engine, considered cumbersome by some developers, worked well for MachineGames, whose plans for *Wolfenstein* were always ambitious in scale.

"A normal game engine, on last generation, would have, for instance, 100MB for textures," Matthies explains. "On current-gen it would be, say, 2GB. Anything you put in the game world has to fit in that budget. But with Tech 5 and MegaTexture streaming, every pixel in the textures can be unique. We never had to worry about tiling or reusing textures. That's why the game is so enormously big."

"Tech 5 was easy to get into," Ojerfors says. "We put our logic – all our scripts – directly into the engine and it let us follow, very easily, like a flowchart, what would affect what. You could see what would happen if someone opened a particular door or if they went to a certain location. The flow between open spaces, closed spaces, action and story defined the game we wanted to make. Tech 5 made building *Wolfenstein* much easier."

From its inception, variety was at the core of *Wolfenstein: The New Order*. The founders of MachineGames had among them an assortment of skills and sensibilities, and it was out of these contrasting ideas that the game took shape. "You can look at *Wolfenstein* and see what MachineGames is," Ojerfors says. "It's a studio based around the personalities of the directors. They all have different ideas, which sounds like a recipe for disaster, but these guys balance each other very well – Jens is very passionate about narrative, and Fredrick is deeply into systems and gunplay. All the aspects of *The New Order* – combat, story, stealth – represent these guys. Out of different ideas they manage to find a single direction."

Tordsson was instrumental to this process. Once development was in full swing and ideas began to fly, it was his job to ensure all the narrative beats flowed into the gunplay, and vice versa. He authored *Wolfenstein*'s walkthrough document and was responsible for how the game was paced. "Pacing is something we always try to think about," he says. "It's like when you're writing a novel. You don't just want to keep hitting the same note over and over; you want to provide a whole range of emotions. Give players violence over and over again and they just get numb to it."

As the game started to come together, Tordsson also took charge of *Wolfenstein*'s localisation process, translating it into Italian, French and Spanish. But it wasn't just language that needed to change. For the German market, Machine had to "sanitise" – as Tordsson puts it – the game, removing any mention of Nazis or Nazi ideology. The trench-coated villains would be referred to simply as 'The Regime'.

"We had to change the dialogue and a lot of the imagery," Tordsson explains. "We just did what we could, tried to make it as close to the international version as was possible. The problem is that in Germany games aren't viewed as art; they're viewed as toys. There needs to be a change in that perspective."

The demands from Germany barely slowed proceedings. The solid foundations laid by Matthies and the others finally began to pay off and, after four years of fairly smooth development, Machine had realised its vision. "Everything we wanted was there in the finished product," Matthies says. "It's extremely close to the original pitch. The one-page story document we wrote is exactly the story that's in the game."

"We had a good idea from the very beginning, and in the end, when we shipped the game, that was the experience that was on the disc," Ojerfors says. "And four years for such a long shooter is not a lot of time, especially when you consider we were building the studio as we went along."

Wolfenstein: The New Order launched on May 20, 2014 and cruised to the top of the UK sales chart. Later that same month, it was the second best-selling game on Steam, behind Ubisoft's *Watch Dogs*. Matthies was able to pay back his loan. "There are so many ways you can make games," he says, "and there are so many ways you can invent a worthwhile experience. But this was a game that perfectly suited us, one where our sensibilities could really shine. For the first time in my career it felt like I didn't have to make any compromise. I'm very, very happy with the result." ■



Jens Matthies
Creative director

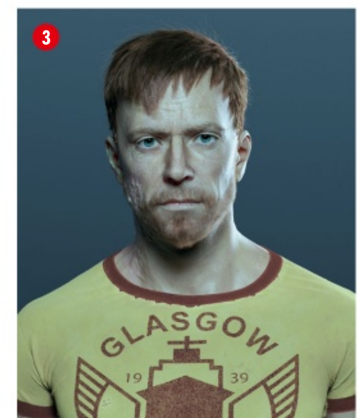
How did you want to portray the Nazi characters differently to previous *Wolfenstein* games?
We wanted to go beyond just leather uniforms and symbols. It was vital that players knew what the Nazis were about, so they could understand why the war they were fighting needed to be fought. I think in 2014, the atrocities that went on in WWII are less alive in the cultural mindset. A lot of people who were alive back then aren't now. To do the subject justice, we really needed the player to understand the Nazi ideology.

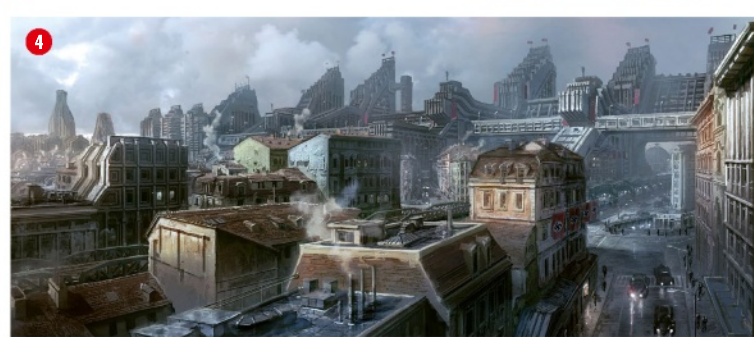
What were your reasons for leaving Starbreeze back in 2009?
I was there from the very beginning; it was a big part of my life. But I ended up in a situation where the opportunity to make a really good game had disappeared. I had to decide whether to stay there, collect a salary and treat it as a job, or leave and start something where I could really make the games I wanted to make.

What sort of things have you learned since starting MachineGames?
We have an obsession for making game worlds feel as real as possible. *Wolfenstein* helped us explore and develop that. We learned to introduce small details that would make the world feel like it existed. If it made sense that your character would jump in a car, for example, then we put that in. When we were less experienced, we had to make compromises to get around stuff that we couldn't figure out. Now we can spend all of that time making the game better. It's still the same amount of reworking, but it's reworking in the right direction.













1 General Deathshead is one of videogames' most vile and most disquieting antagonists.
2 Mechs become more common as *The New Order*'s campaign advances. You also get to pilot one.
3 Fergus, your ex-squad leader, has a decent Scottish accent, as well as a fine line in T-shirts.
4 Environments are as oppressive as they are deeply atmospheric.
5 Enemy design blends utilitarian functionality with sci-fi flair.
6 Weapons are ridiculously, but brilliantly, oversized, lending every gun a real sense of heft



STUDIO PROFILE

UBISOFT REFLECTIONS

Celebrating 30 years of UK creativity at the birthplace of *Shadow Of The Beast*

By Lee Hall

Tapping into a rich seam of local talent, Newcastle-based Reflections has achieved what, in this industry, is a rare corporate milestone: its 30th birthday. It may be unrecognisable now from the studio founded three decades ago by *Driver* creator Martin Edmondson, but several Ferraris, buyouts and at least one helicopter ride later, Reflections is still at the forefront of UK development under the stewardship of MD **Pauline Jacquey**.

Thanks to the company's collaborative, decentralised structure, taking in Reflections' offices is a little like meandering through an E3 booth. Huge wall art reminds visitors that driving MMOG *The Crew*, co-op shooter *Tom Clancy's The Division* and the latest in the *Just Dance* series are all in production here.

It's rare to find such development diversity in a single building. The dual-screen desktops may be ubiquitous, but with so many different games in production, the place feels as lively and varied as it does efficient. It's certainly a melting pot of accents from across the globe, not least of which is earthy Geordie, the uneven local twang.

Sitting behind the monitors is a broad range of experience, from interns to those who have been here for decades. But none can match **Russell Lazzari**, Reflections' longest-serving dev, who's been at the company for 22 years. Lazzari, we are told, is a genius. And he never gives interviews. Well, almost never.

He tells us how he began life at the studio, a tale that echoes the arc of British development, where bedrooms gave way to boardrooms. "I was playing *Shadow Of The Beast* on the Amiga," he explains, referring to one of Reflections' seminal titles, whose difficulty was set somewhere north of fiendish. "My mum walked in and said, 'Ah, your sister goes to school with him [Martin Edmondson].' So I looked in the phone book and found out where Martin lived, and went around on the off chance. I just wanted to see what they were doing. They let us in, and they were developing *Shadow Of The Beast II* and *Awesome* at the time."

Lazzari was just 14, but he clearly made an impression; three years later, he got a call to join the studio. "I think there was a dispute between the two [Edmonson brothers]," he says. "Martin needed somebody to make a game with, so he asked me and Phil [Baxter, now at Codemasters]. I was a coder, and he was an artist, so it was a perfect combination." Amiga platformer *Brian The Lion* was born, arriving in 1994.




Pauline Jacquey is Reflections' MD, and was producer on *Rayman 2* and *3*. Will Musson is producer on *The Crew*

But the real turning point for Reflections came with its next game, 1995's *Destruction Derby*, which coincided with the advent of PlayStation. **Will Musson**, now a producer on *The Crew*, joined the company at that time. Like Lazzari, his route into Reflections was hardly conventional. Jobless after graduating from university with a computer science degree, Musson took a night-shift role at a supermarket and was just about making ends meet when Martin Edmondson called to sound him out. Musson – a friend of Lazzari's sister – jumped at the chance to put his degree to use and narrowly avoided a career at ornament retailer Collectibles.

"When I arrived, there was a PlayStation dev kit sitting there," says Musson. It was reportedly the first to reach thirdparty hands in the UK. "It was this thing that was going to get launched in the future and it was really exciting. I thought, 'This is amazing. I'm young, I'm coming to work every day, and it's great fun.'"

Destruction Derby and 1999's *Driver* remain, for Musson, the two biggest milestones in all of Reflections' 30 years. "With *Destruction Derby*, we very much felt part of something special," he says. "A console was coming out. Sony was pushing its marketing. And then when *Driver* came along… Yes, it was hard. Yes, there were times when it wasn't a massive amount of fun. But at times we messed about, had fun, went out together and we were all a great team."

The popularity of Sony's console took the studio by surprise, as it did many industry onlookers. Musson recalls a rock'n'roll era, but not one that involved outrageous excess. They did once send someone in a chopper to hand in some code for mastering, but if things ever got really crazy, no one is prepared to admit it.

"There were parties," Musson says. "We had a party in Stockholm, which seemed to be linked to an MTV party, at the end of *Driver 2*. But it wasn't like suddenly everyone got millions of pounds. Suddenly, everyone just felt we were doing something good."

Almost two decades later, Reflections is run by Pauline Jacquey, who succeeded Gareth Edmondson in 2012. In an interview room, she is framed by a banner bearing the silhouette of *Driver* protagonist John Tanner. It looms large and you have to wonder whether the series, with all its ups and downs, is ever far from the studio's thoughts. We ask if Reflections, which since 2011's *Driver: San Francisco* has played a supporting role within Ubisoft, has ambitions to once again take the lead on a project?

"We will lead a project when it is unbearable for us to not do it – when it is so obvious we should be doing it because we are so good at what we do," Jacquey says. "I think it will come with time. When, or if, we work on a new IP, it needs to be such an event that it changes the shape of the industry. I want to be very, very ready for this, and we are not ready."

Jacquey is cognisant of the strengths and weaknesses of the team. Brutally honest about them, in fact. "We have been working for 27 years on the driving genre almost exclusively. This creates voids. It makes us super, super strong in open worlds and super, super strong in the engine, strong in physics, strong in vehicle AI.

"WHEN, OR IF, WE WORK ON A NEW IP, IT NEEDS TO BE SUCH AN EVENT THAT IT CHANGES THE SHAPE OF THE INDUSTRY"



Founded 1984
Employees 230
Key staff Pauline Jacquey (MD), Will Musson (producer), Paul Pawlicki (producer), Martin Oliver (producer), Pete Young (producer)
URL reflections.ubisoft.com
Selected softography *Shadow Of The Beast*, *Destruction Derby*, *Driver*, *Driver: San Francisco*, *Just Dance*, *Watch Dogs*
Current projects *Just Dance 2015*, *The Crew*, *Tom Clancy's The Division*, unannounced titles





Development on *The Division* (left) is led by Ubisoft Massive, but districts of its apocalyptic New York milieu are being crafted in Newcastle, which today is home to a 230-strong team

But we are not very strong in NPC AI and we aren't very strong in aim assist… Collaboration is a way for us to touch that blind spot. It's a way to reinforce our skillset, and our confidence."

It's a skillset, however, that ideally suited the company's hallmark series, which seemingly retired on a high in 2011. Certainly Musson misses *Driver* keenly. Is he in love with the series? "I think… yes, I am. Should we be making another *Driver* for the sake of it? No. We need to do something special as a studio. If that's *Driver*, then fair enough, but it might not be. It might not even be a driving game – it's what I like doing, but the studio has moved into lots of different areas recently. So, as a studio, we need to know where we are going."

Looking around Reflections' home, that could be in one of many directions, and there's more going on here than outsiders are allowed to see. The circuitous route we're led on to the second floor provides a delicious waft of the fusion lunch being served by a visiting vendor, but it's mostly about keeping eyes off the hidden corners. What might be cooking beyond that partition wall?

Reflections does open up one secret area for our visit – its 'indie' unit. With seven staff, this team works on early concepts that could evolve into games or provide new functionality to other titles. The game we see might be secret, but the methodology is less hush-hush. Producer Pete Young explains that the unit is constantly engaged in the development of small ideas. Concepts are tested, shared internally and refined.

In the collaborative world of Ubisoft, where most staff contribute to globe-spanning projects, such quick and dirty development must provide a welcome change of pace. At the very least it keeps alive the "adventurous spirit of Reflections", an oft-repeated phrase in these corridors, where images of safe bets hang proudly from the walls.

Elsewhere, work on *Tom Clancy's The Division* continues apace under producer Paul Pawlicki. Around 100 Reflections staff are involved in developing the co-op cover shooter, supporting Swedish lead Ubisoft Massive. While Reflections remains quiet on specifics, this is an opportunity to demonstrate the economies Ubisoft can achieve thanks to Massive's engine, Snowdrop, and a growing bank of art assets.

Junior environment artist and ex-intern Bryn Felton-Pitt draws up a couple of buildings, reskinning and resizing them in seconds to create a scene into which he quickly drops a character. A few desks away, another artist builds a church. Similar churches exist in New York, explains lead environment artist Richard Daglish, but they tend to be squashed between buildings. Here they create a space that is at once visually arresting and capable of supporting multiple angles and styles of attack, from shadow-hugging stealth to bulldozer-subtle frontal assaults. The work is monitored by the production lead from Massive, but otherwise the local dev team has the freedom to create its allocated neighbourhoods.

> **"IT'S RARE TO HAVE SUCH AN AMOUNT OF TALENT BUT NO EGO. MOST TALENTED PEOPLE ARE KIND OF ARSEHOLES"**

At the heart of the activity, and Reflections' building, is Jacquey's desk, which is how she likes it. "I sit with everybody in an open space – you absolutely get the feeling in terms of energy, the level of morale, whether people are happy."

Jacquey is always direct, and she expects similar forthrightness from her employees. "I like people to tell me if I am not doing a good job. I want them to tell me if they are unhappy, not motivated, they don't understand the vision of the game or they don't feel that we are efficient. I want to know. It's fine to put your finger on the things that hurt a bit."

Jacquey, who has been with Ubisoft since 1997 and put in stints in Paris, Shanghai and Montreal, says she loves working in the North East, citing the industrial coal mining past of the region as a possible reason for the humility of her gifted team. "It's rare to have such an amount of expertise and talent but no ego – most talented people are kind of arseholes," she admits.

She also freely acknowledges Ubisoft's reputation for "not being super competitive with salaries". But money isn't everything. "People come here and they work with us not because they can make a lot of money and become super, super successful as individuals, but as part of a team that creates something really special."

Jacquey exudes confidence, but it's no mean feat providing leadership in a team with a flat structure as part of a decentralised company. So how does she marry those ideas? "Honestly, I think I could do better. David Polfeldt at Massive is amazing for this – in terms of promoting people and ideas from a meritocracy and not relying on the traditional management tips and tricks."

The key for Jacquey is to inform her staff to the point of making them over-informed. She shares information on finance, sales, processes and competition. "Information is power," she says, "so spread it – because you want to have very powerful guys." ■



1 *Destruction Derby* saw the exploitation of some defining passions: cars and mayhem.
2 *Driver* and its first two sequels were made under the creative direction of company founder Martin Edmondson.
3 *Driver: Parallel Lines* chose to return Tanner to his roots.
4 *Driver: San Francisco* was well received in 2011, partially thanks to its Shift mechanics.
5 *Just Dance* games are a regular job for Reflections.
6 *The Crew* is due November.
7 Reflections contributed driving missions and building interiors to *Watch Dogs*.
8 *The Division* is built in Massive's Snowdrop engine

PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Diablo III PS4
We may have scoffed at its announcement, but the version of *Diablo III* released on Xbox One and PS4 is what the original release should have been. *Reaper Of Souls'* Act V might be the best of the lot, Adventure mode has added a proper endgame, and the real-money auction house is just a foul memory. The result is loot-crazed dungeon crawling of the highest order.

Dead Rising 3: Apocalypse Edition PC
Still Trying To Play is more like it. We'd hoped that x86-based console hardware would mean the days of the abysmal PC port were behind us, but it seems no one told Capcom. When it's not crashing on startup, *Dead Rising 3* is dropping frames and tearing like crazy. In darker moments, it's easy to idly wonder whether the game might have been intentionally hamstrung on PC to make Xbox One look good.

Metro Redux Xbox One
The PC versions of *Metro 2033* and *Last Light* were considerably better looking than their console counterparts, and that's still the case, but the extra processing thump of PS4 and Xbox One has closed the gap a little. But whatever format you choose to play it on, *Redux*'s engine-up overhaul has updated the less action-focused first game with *Last Light*'s AI, stealth mechanics and visuals, making our return trip even more terrifying than the first time around.

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE



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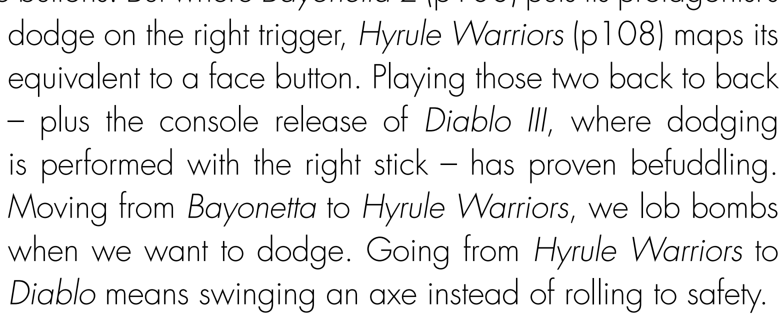


Input error

One of 360's best features was global controller preferences – the way it would remember that you liked your Y-axis inverted, say, to save you fiddling with settings whenever a new disc went in the tray. It was a great bit of player-focused OS design, so it's surprising that it didn't set a new standard.

Perhaps that's a reflection of the extent to which the industry has standardised things itself. Load up a new driving game and your index fingers immediately fall on the rear triggers to accelerate and brake. Chances are your new FPS will have *Call Of Duty*'s controls, too. It has its benefits. After playing through this month's new releases, we certainly came away wishing developers of 3D brawlers would get in a room and agree on a genre standard.

The closest they have come to best practice is mapping light and heavy attacks to the top row of face buttons. But where *Bayonetta 2* (p100) puts its protagonist's



dodge on the right trigger, *Hyrule Warriors* (p108) maps its equivalent to a face button. Playing those two back to back – plus the console release of *Diablo III*, where dodging is performed with the right stick – has proven befuddling. Moving from *Bayonetta* to *Hyrule Warriors*, we lob bombs when we want to dodge. Going from *Hyrule Warriors* to *Diablo* means swinging an axe instead of rolling to safety.

Happily, it rarely matters. In a driving game, an errant button press could easily cost you a race, but in *Bayonetta*, *Hyrule Warriors* and *Diablo III* it merely means a dented health bar and waiting a split-second before you carry on hitting things until they either keel over, disappear or explode. There may be no consensus on button layouts in the genre, but one thing these games all agree on is that the absolute priority is making the player feel like the most powerful being on the planet.



Bayonetta 2

Nintendo may have rescued it from the cutting-room floor, funded the rest of its development and published it as a Wii U exclusive, but *Bayonetta 2* is still a Sega game. It's something that's made clear from the opening minutes, when the logo of Nintendo's one-time rival adorns a taxi-top billboard, and of which you're often reminded, since Platinum continues the first game's line in Sega homages. Indeed, splash-screen logos and borrowed costumes aside, on the face of it this is as far removed from the Nintendo house style as it's possible to get, a hyperviolent tale of a sexualised protagonist whose modesty is covered only by her own hair; who sashays, strips and pole dances; and who shouts "Fuck off!" at the end of combos.

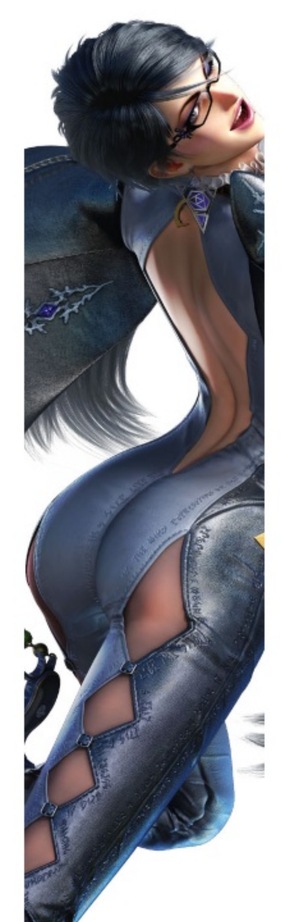
And yet *Bayonetta 2* is in many ways a perfect fit for Nintendo, with its bright blue skies, its easy charm, its relentless procession of ideas and its immaculately tuned controls. And as the sequel to the best game Platinum has ever made, it sports a best-in-class set of combat mechanics that ensure it is as welcoming to the uninitiated as it is frighteningly deep for old hands. Newcomers can merrily button mash their way through the lower difficulty levels and still be made to feel like the most powerful being in the universe. Almost every combo string in the game, whether planned or improvised, ends with a Wicked Weave, a screen-filling, hard-hitting attack performed by a demon summoned from the Inferno below and given form by Bayonetta's hair. Other games in this genre hide their greatest prizes behind a skill barrier that may take dozens of hours of study and practice to surmount. *Bayonetta 2* simply asks that you keep pressing buttons.

The rewards for doing so are greater than ever. As before, landing attacks builds a magic meter, which can be spent on Torture Attacks, during which our heroine summons guillotines, iron maidens and demons to dole out heavy, bloody damage on single opponents in exchange for a spot of button mashing. Fill the magic meter entirely, however, and you can activate the new Umbran Climax mode. Here, health recharges, every normal attack is a Wicked Weave, and combo enders hammer everything onscreen. It adds yet another layer of dazzling spectacle to a series that hardly lacked for it already, and that looks even better now on Wii U.

It's not the increased resolution that strikes you, but the vibrancy of it all: this is a riot of colour even during its quieter moments, as you guide Bayonetta across the planet, down to its infernal underworld and even back in time, jumping from a bustling New York to the depths of Hell, from a sun-baked mountain city to the bowels of a gigantic demon. By turns *Bayonetta 2*'s world shimmers and glistens, crumbles and pulsates, enthralls and horrifies. And when the feet and fists start flying, it's something else entirely. Load up the first game, even in revamped form, and you'll be struck

Publisher Nintendo
Developer PlatinumGames
Format Wii U
Release October 20 (JP), 24 (EU, NA)

This is a riotous, spectacular work of the highest order of camp, always ready with a lascivious wink and a knob gag



by how grainy and washed-out it looks, and begin to wonder if its inclusion with the special and First Print editions is meant to show how far Platinum has come.

Yet in a way, what Platinum has done best is turn back to the past. In the five years since *Bayonetta*'s Japanese debut, the Osaka studio's work in this genre has seen it dabble in online brawling with *Anarchy Reigns*, riff off Saturday morning cartoons with *The Wonderful 101*, and rescue *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance* from development limbo. None have come close to recapturing *Bayonetta*'s magic, and Platinum clearly delights in being back in control of its finest creation. The influence of its other games can be felt occasionally – it reprises the slow-motion shot of a blade narrowly missing the protagonist's chin that it used and reused to the point of fetishism in *Rising*, for instance. But this is *Bayonetta*, a riotous, spectacular work of the highest order of camp, one that's always ready with a lascivious wink and a knob gag, even when the fate of the universe is at stake. There is still nothing quite like it.

There are stumbles along the way, admittedly, but the only thing wrong with *Bayonetta 2* is how closely it adheres to the original game's formula. It is a CPU and GPU upgrade away from a game that came out in 2009, with many of the same weapons, items, enemies and even sound effects. That might be more of a problem if the genre had moved on in the past five years, but no studio, not even Platinum itself, has even come close to pushing it. Only a fool would meddle with *Bayonetta*'s magic, then, and instead the developer has wisely focused on ironing out the original's few kinks. Those sudden, mid-cinematic, instafail QTEs are gone, and so too is the shooting minigame between missions. Enemy weapon pickups are now a bonus rather than a penalty, bound to the button that fires your pistols instead of the one that swings the weapon in your hands. Pacing has been tightened up across the board, the Sega homages no longer outstaying their welcome, and the cutscenes, while still many, are a good deal snappier.

They're as full as ever of oddballs too. Platinum's bizarre love of cultural stereotyping has become so frequent that it is starting to feel like it is the first bullet point on the studio's mission statement. Returning to the supporting cast are Rodin, the soul-talking African-American merchant, and Enzo, the dumpy, half-witted Italian-American who ends every other line with 'Fugeddaboutit', whether apropos or not. They're joined by Loki, a young man of indeterminate non-white descent whose British accent was seemingly voiced by someone who has never set foot in the UK, but spent a couple of days binge watching episodes of Game Of Thrones and Downton Abbey before giving it their best shot. Yet these little slips are much easier to forgive in the context of a game that delights in its own ▶



ABOVE When the Torture Attack prompt appeared in the first game, activating it was a no-brainer, but here Umbran Climax gives you pause for thought. Do you want to instantly kill one enemy, or wait and do big damage to them all? **LEFT** Costumes range from the respectable to the cringeworthy. While Bayonetta's default design shows how to walk the tightrope between sexy and sexualised, put her in a schoolgirl uniform and it's another matter entirely

BELOW The story sends Bayonetta to Inferno after a summon gone wrong, and means she faces off against demons as well as the first game's angels. Some later variants have extended combos of their own; another has an instakill grab



ABOVE As before, Bayonetta can transform into a panther for speedy ground traversal, or a crow to extend your air time. What's new is a sea snake transformation that helps to speed up your movement underwater



The Lumen Sage is to *Bayonetta 2* was Jeanne was to the first game: a recurring humanoid opponent with similar abilities to your own. The first battle against him is an instant genre classic, and the others aren't half bad

daftness, and before long the camera's back squarely where it belongs: on the impossibly lithe, cocky Umbran Witch saving the world one busted-up demon, one slapped-down angel, one pithy quip at a time.

The world is saved one cartwheel, knee slide and pirouette at a time, too. If the punch and kick buttons are the fireworks, the right-trigger dodge is touchpaper, a fully invincible evasive move that, when performed as an enemy attack is about to hit, activates Witch Time, slowing everything onscreen to a snail's pace. It lets you catch your breath and launch counterattacks, sure, but its most useful function is giving you a precious second to find yourself amid the carnage. Without it, Platinum could not set one boss battle against a backdrop of a skyscraper-sized demon battling a similarly gigantic angel, the latter occasionally raining down fire and brimstone on you. Games in this genre have long used audio cues to signal imminent attacks, but that has typically been inspired by necessity, dictated by wonky cameras. Here, the action is rarely less than perfectly framed, but there is sometimes simply too much of it. Without Witch Time, *Bayonetta 2* would be impossible.

Instead, it's made straightforward, at least at first, but your initial playthrough is only the beginning. This is a remarkably customisable game; you have the tools to make it as hard or as easy as you like. Accessories let you fiddle with balance, automatically activating Witch Time when you get hit, or having every foe spawn in an enraged state. Work your way up through the difficulty levels and you'll face new enemy types, while existing patterns are remixed, their attacks faster, your mistakes more costly. You'll experiment with new weapons, such as the fast-firing Kafka bow with its poison arrows, the foot-mounted Chain Chomp, or the Chernobog, a scythe formed of three serrated blades and a shotgun. Nintendo-themed costumes change pickups, sound effects and even the tone of stages, and there's enough unlockable gear for you to wear a different outfit on every new level. There are more playable characters, collectibles leading to new accessories, and multiple hidden battles in every chapter. There are more rewards for completing the game at higher difficulty levels or within a certain time. There's online co-op (see 'Climax together'), and the Witch Trials survival challenges. There's always something new to do, something different to try, a higher mission rank to seek, another reason to ignore the other games on your Wii U Home menu. This is a game that you can complete in ten hours, but play and replay forever.



CLIMAX TOGETHER

You'll spend parts of *Bayonetta 2* fighting with an AI accomplice with a similar moveset to your own. It's thrilling stuff, enemies exploding in showers of light thanks to attacks you never launched, and their health bars melting away under the combined fury. Your companion is critical to the story, but this is no mere narrative device: it's a dry run for Tag Climax, a series of online co-op battles whose stages are unlocked in the campaign. You bet halos, the in-game currency, on which of you will finish with the higher combo score; the more you bet, the more generous the payout, and the higher the difficulty. Prepare to die and die again, though downed companions can be revived, ensuring there's a dash of co-operation to break up the friendly competition.

You never tire of it, but how could you? This is a game that begins with Santa riding a car along the side of a building, continues with you summoning a demon to headbutt a meteor, and ends with the most joyously cathartic climax of any game since, well, *Bayonetta*. When the pace does dip, there is more than enough charm, wit and heart to take its place. It is a masterclass in combat design, in videogame variety, in the balance between accessibility and depth. Sure, it's a sequel, but it's a sequel to what has stood, for almost five years, as the best game of its type ever made. Until now, that is. Sega's loss is Nintendo's gain: Bayonetta, twirling away from a gigantic demon's maw and smacking the highest choir of angels on the nose, has just given Wii U its first true classic.

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Post Script

Platinum's atypical reweaving of invincibility is a design masterstroke

Of all the ways in which videogames break the rules of nature – their double jumps and 50ft wall runs, their guns too big for a man to carry – invincibility is perhaps the most irresistible subversion. This, after all, is the impossible dream, the ultimate rule-breaker. We wouldn't say no to the power of flight, but throughout we'd be terrified about making a mistake, crashing into a cliff face or slamming into the ground. With full invincibility? Now you're talking.

It's something that *Bayonetta 2*'s publisher knows only too well: after all, the Starman (AKA Super Star) is one of a select few power-ups that have been series constants since the first *Super Mario Bros*. The Super Mushroom is essentially a shield, the Fire Flower is a gun, and the 1-Up Mushroom is a safety net. All are important parts of a *Mario* game's ruleset. But the Super Star? It's a licence to run free, to briefly forget every rule the game has imposed upon you apart from the one thing that makes a platform game a platform game: don't fall off the edge of the world.

In *Bayonetta 2*, you can fall off things to your heart's content. PlatinumGames plonks you back from whence you fell and doesn't even take an industry-standard chunk of health bar as payment. It's classic Platinum, typically atypical, a reflection of the approach the studio takes in everything it does: the only ruleset by which it abides is its own. It's just as well, too, because in its desire to create something fast-paced and spectacular that is accessible to all in so historically niche a genre, it has no alternative but to once again carve out its own path. It's most evident in *Bayonetta*'s right-trigger dodge, a fully invincible evasive move whose design runs almost totally counter to accepted standards.

Games in this genre, *Bayonetta* included, all progress in a similar way. The enemy threat grows in number and in size, their health bars lengthen, they attack faster and hit harder. While you will also become more powerful over the course of the game, their rate of growth has to be disproportionate to ensure you feel increasingly challenged. You have to hit them many more times to kill them than they have to hit you, and so defence quickly takes priority over attack. You can have the most finely crafted combo system ever, but if players can't stay out of trouble, it will be for nought. This genre's wheat is separated from its chaff not just by how it lets players cause trouble, but the means it gives them to escape it. How do you not get hit?

A block button is one option, but it slows down the pace, and a character as lithe, explosive and animated as Bayonetta has no business standing still. A parry-and-riposte system, meanwhile, requires precision, which in turn necessitates a certain style of game. Tomonobu Itagaki's *Ninja Gaiden* games combine both, letting you counter an opponent's move by blocking and pressing an attack button at the moment it connects. While thrilling in its own way, it can only work in a game that is slow, methodical and clean. Countering is about anticipation and execution, not reaction, so you need to see what's going on. In *Ninja Gaiden*, there is rarely any more onscreen than the player and their foes. That won't do in *Bayonetta*, where angels and demons battle overhead, where attack animations fill the screen and your view is often obscured by showers of pyrotechnics.

> You can have the most finely crafted combo system ever, but if players can't stay out of trouble, it will be for nought



FromSoftware's *Souls* games take a similar approach to *Ninja Gaiden*, though rather than build them around parries, here it is an advanced optional technique that plays far more heavily on risk and reward. Itagaki's design is much safer; you're holding the guard button the whole time, so if you mistime the counter input Hayabusa will simply remain in block stance and take no damage. A *Souls* parry is all or nothing, a tap of the block button deflecting an attack if you time it properly and leaving you wide open if you don't. The dodge is built on a similar model. The forward roll has more invincibility than the others, but mistime any roll and you're in trouble. Both dodging and blocking consume stamina, meaning the safest way to play is to keep your distance, creating openings by baiting mistakes.

In *Bayonetta 2*, Platinum has little interest in risk, only reward, and thinks patience and safety are for bores. It wants to fill the screen with almost constant insanity and make sure that even genre newcomers can meaningfully add to it. That can only be possible with a flamboyant, mechanically straightforward combo system and, above all, a dodge move that is fully invincible from its first animation frame to the last.

It is an incredibly accommodating design, made even more so by the fact that you can dodge up to five times in succession without a recovery penalty. Not all attacks are equal, after all: a boss's giant hammer swing takes longer to wind up than the swipe of a regular enemy's claw, and while Platinum wants you to learn from your mistakes, it doesn't want you to suffer for them. It wants you to feel not like Itagaki's humble, steely ninja or FromSoftware's imperilled adventurer, but the most powerful being on any spectral plane – someone who greets a colossal demonic dragon wrapped around a skyscraper with a shrug and an unimpressed quip before balletically and effortlessly staving its head in. Platinum can stack greater and greater odds against you, safe in the knowledge you have the means not just to survive, but dazzle while doing so. And it's all thanks to the dodge, *Bayonetta*'s ultimate rule-breaker, which ensures that whatever God and the Devil may deign to throw at you next, invincibility is only a button press away. ■

The Sims 4

There have always been four principle parts to *The Sims*, and these have been left unscathed by the process of developing a full sequel to the game. *The Sims 4* is, as its predecessors were, a time management puzzle game themed around the basic inconveniences of real life. It's also a toolbox for creative players with an interest in architecture and fashion, and a complex digital pet – an AI-driven collection of consumerist sea monkeys that you release into a tank and watch as they grow. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there is the fantasy that all of this represents in aggregate: the unique opportunity *The Sims* provides to create a new life for yourself or others, to steer those characters to success, to watch as they fall in love, become astronauts, or are killed by a malfunctioning oven.

The Sims 4 meets all of those criteria, and it does so in many of the same ways as its predecessor. As a new base game – meaning that the many additions of *The Sims 3*'s 11 expansion packs have been stripped away – it promises a focused refresh of those basic principles, not expansion beyond them. This is a conservatively designed sequel, one that drills down deeper into the bedrock of what *The Sims* has always been, rather than exploring new territory.

The life of a Sim is still governed by Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The bottom of that pyramid is much the same as it has always been: a series of bars representing physiological desires that are filled by instructing each Sim in a household to apportion their time between activities in the house. In *The Sims 4*, however, the upper regions of the pyramid – social drives, self-actualisation – are complicated by a sophisticated emotion system that applies moods to Sims based on their dispositions and recent experiences. In turn, those emotions inform the Sim's short-term desires, which if fulfilled unlock points that can be spent on permanent character upgrades: learning to read faster, to make friends more readily, and so on.

Emotions also unlock new activities in the environment that can transfer, intensify or calm an emotional state. One angry Sim can enrage another using the 'Rile Up' action. An energised Sim gains more from going for a run and will have extra desire to do so. This adds a strategic dimension to time management that wasn't present before. There are optimal emotions for various skills and careers – even sadness has its uses – and managing a Sim's time and relationships in order to curate these states informs what you have them do. A Sim making their way down the entertainment career path benefits from feeling inspired, and so getting them up early to take a long, thoughtful shower is superior to letting them sleep in. In most cases these are small decisions, but factor them in across a household and it becomes a substantial addition.

Publisher EA
Developer Maxis
Format PC
Release Out now

This is a conservative sequel, one that drills down deeper into the bedrock of what The Sims has always been



This is true of *The Sims 4*'s other quality-of-life additions, particularly the improved animations, reduced loading times, smoother pathfinding and the ability for characters to perform multiple tasks at once where it makes sense for them to do so. Sims are no longer locked into one animation, and you can now write a novel while swivelling around in a chair, chatting to a friend and listening to music if you wish.

The emotion system also enhances the fantasy element, as it provides the sense that these characters have much more involved internal lives. That said, the AI is restricted in a number of ways that prevent these new systems from impacting the experience of players who want to create a sandbox and watch it run. There seems to be a limit to the extremity of the actions that Sims will take without the player's direct input: they'll never make substantial decisions about their own lives if left alone, even with full automation selected. This is understandable, to the extent that the player has to be given some choices to make, but it's a shame that these new systems don't provide much additional depth to the narratives that spring up among the Sims that the player isn't controlling. Sometimes, angry Sims will strop at each other. That's about it.

This sense that the rest of the world is trapped in amber is compounded by a new neighbourhood system that divides the world up into groups of small lots. Transitioning between any interior space requires a load screen, and each district is comprised of a handful of housing areas, a park and a small commercial district. Initially, the sense is of a *SimCity*-style reduction in scale and perhaps ambition. This isn't quite right: functionally, the range of things you can do is much the same as – if not slightly greater than – *The Sims 3* at launch. It can also manage interactions between many onscreen Sims at once. But there's still that *feeling* of smallness. This is, after all, a game about feelings.

Longstanding issues with pathfinding are lessened but still occur, and sometimes Sims will tie themselves in knots trying to disengage from one situation to pursue some other need. There are also a few balance issues. Household utilities of similar quality levels will all tend to break at the same time, and after the first few instances of this it stops being a pace-changing problem to solve and becomes a repetitive chore. Fewer, more substantial mishaps would be a positive change here.

This is nonetheless the best and most substantial-feeling base game so far. That is perhaps a double-edged sword: there's a sense of being back at the bottom of a steep hill, your investment of time and money stretching away into the years of inevitable expansions to come. *The Sims* hasn't changed much. But there's still nothing else really like it, and that, ultimately, makes the case for its continued relevance.

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RIGHT Detailed editing of a Sim's features is possible in the character creator, which also provides options for randomly generating new Sims or deriving them from the 'genetics' of their relatives





ABOVE Multi-tasking feels like a natural part of the series but it's actually a new addition in *The Sims 4*. Characters will naturally fall into conversation with each other while performing other tasks, such as cooking.

LEFT Large buildings can contain multiple households, and represent the culmination of many hours of playing, saving money, designing and redesigning the same space



BELOW Communal buildings like gyms, lounges, libraries and bars are the best way to meet other AI-controlled Sims from your area. Until you make friends, visits from neighbours are uncommon




In-game items can be freely resized using cheats, which is useful if you ever need to create entirely figurative images

Post Script

How The Sims 4 suggests EA's attitude to its customers is improving – gradually

The rise of *The Sims* is inextricably linked to the rise of its publisher. The first game in the series was an experiment by Will Wright that found extraordinary success with a far broader demographic than EA would have normally reached. *The Sims* was in many ways a precursor to social games, to browser-based strategy and the other incredibly lucrative forms of the medium that largely fall outside of what hobbyists concern themselves with. Its formidable popularity has meant it has passed through every business model that EA has experimented with over its long, long history of asking slightly too much for slightly too little.

This begins with the era of the expansion pack, of continual boxed iteration that maintained a game's presence on shelves, and continued – with *The Sims 3* – into the era of microtransactions and downloadable content. *The Sims Online* used a subscription-based model and, in its later incarnation as *EA-Land*, spawned an experimental user-generated content store. The series expanded onto Facebook, console and mobile, as part of an EA-wide attempt to spread its successful brands as broadly as possible and then monetise them down to the nuts and bolts.

The middle section of *The Sims 3*'s lifecycle coincides neatly with arguably the lowest point in EA's reputation with players – the years following the acquisition of BioWare when *Battlefield* became an annualised answer to *Call Of Duty*, *Dragon Age* was disastrously retooled as a fantasy-action game, and day-one DLC and extensive preorder promotions became the rule. In this period, which arguably lasted until the end of 2013, it became impossible to buy an EA game unless you bought it on EA's terms, particularly on PC where download service Origin gradually became the publisher's sole method of distribution. EA's customers were tightly corralled into purchasing decisions that left them feeling both mugged and legislated against: if you didn't buy a specific version of a new BioWare game at launch, you'd miss out on entire companion characters, storylines and expansions further down the line. It's this that fostered the sense that EA's primary aim was to drain, rather than serve, its customers – and EA's favourite developers – of everything they had, and saw the publisher crowned Worst Company In America two years in a row.

The Sims 4 marks a slight but tangible improvement to the status quo – a change in the company's attitude that should, hopefully, put the worst of these damaging monetisation experiments behind it. At launch, the game's preorder and special-edition bonuses are meagre. Purchase the digital deluxe edition and you'll receive a few new pieces of tiki-themed furniture, a couple of hats and a downloadable soundtrack; nice to have but not something the average player will miss. Furthermore, there's no sign of a premium content store in the game *at all* at launch, which seems like such a shocking omission for the company that we had to check twice.

The Gallery, which could have been a prime platform for microtransactions, is simply a way for players to freely share the things they've made. This level of connectivity could have been used to justify making an always-online game with all of the attendant benefits to repelling piracy – but no, it's entirely optional. There will, inevitably, be expansions, but they will at least be a known and quantifiable cost to the player, and can be sensibly assessed on individual merits.

If it seems odd to praise a company for its decision to *not* do something awful, consider that this is the cynical position EA has left its players in over the past couple of years. *The Sims 4* marks a positive shift away from those attitudes, in all regards except price: the digital deluxe edition costs £60, and the standard edition – which costs a heaving £50 – is hidden in a submenu on Origin. ■

Hyrule Warriors

Publisher Nintendo/Koei Tecmo (JP)
Developer Omega Force, Team Ninja
Format Wii U
Release Out now, September 26 (NA)

We're far too good at this. The *Musou* (AKA *Warriors*) series goes out of its way to make you feel powerful, but Omega Force might have gone too far this time; every few minutes, we break *Hyrule Warriors*. The engine groans beneath the weight of our actions, the framerate tanking as Link charges a few dozen foes towards an arena wall or Ganondorf crushes everything onscreen with a giant demonic hand. We pause in empty arenas, waiting for another set of enemies to load in. The stream of UI text popups runs 30 seconds behind the action because we are just too strong, too fast. Koei Tecmo's engine has been built specifically to handle an industry-leading level of hack-and-slash carnage, but it can't keep up with us.

This should be ruinous. Instead, it feels like a celebration. Rather than cautiously Z-targeting one enemy at a time on a journey from boyhood innocence to world's saviour, our Link effortlessly juggles a wave of foes with a jet of fire. Rather than awaiting rescue in the bowels of a temple at the end of the world, we watch Zelda zigzag through a crowd, leaping into the air and obliterating the stragglers with a volley of light arrows. And they're joined on the character select screen by a host of fellow warriors, the series' supporting cast and leading lights transformed into an ensemble. Goron chief Darunia wields a hammer and chucks gigantic boulders; Midna slaps foes around with a magic hand made of hair. Sheik fights with a harp; newcomer Lana, a spellbook; bug-obsessed Agitha, a parasol. All have access to Link's kit bag: the subversive thrill of seeing Zelda loose off the hookshot, or Ganondorf turn from treasure chest to camera with a piece of heart in hand, never really fades. As a work of fan service, *Hyrule Warriors* is almost without equal.

As a game, though, *Hyrule Warriors* has plenty of equals – almost 30 of them in the past five years, in fact. It is the latest in Koei Tecmo's *Musou* series, and so it comes bound to a certain mechanical template. Here, it involves repetition of a handful of simple decisions: when to use a special move, to activate Focus Spirit for powered-up attacks, or to dodge. And above all, how long would you like to keep mashing the light attack button before you start mashing the strong attack one? *Warriors* games have always prized spectacle over systems, and even the shortest combo strings here produce dazzling results, but the outcome is always the same: a crowd of dead enemies evaporates in a shower of rupees, and then you move on to the next.

Variety is one substitute for complexity, and while the character select screen affords plenty of it, much of the Legends story mode either limits you to a choice of a few select characters or, worse, gives you no choice at all. As thrilling as it is to lay hands on Ganondorf, by the time you've swung his dual blades through three consecutive missions, you've seen enough demonic hands to last a lifetime. The crafting system and skill trees, powered by materials found in the field, are a reward for repetition, rather than a solution to it.

There is a tremendous amount going on, to the point that it's all too easy to miss a mission-critical SOS



At least the missions offer a bit more variety than the mechanics. In one, you need to escort an ally carrying soup to a god who, when fed, creates pathways to new areas. In another, you must stop Bombchus from blowing up and taking a base's worth of allies with them. All the while comrades are calling for help, characters are chatting about the bigger picture, you're being warned that a couple of keeps are about to fall into enemy hands, and being urged to press on to the next objective. There is a tremendous amount going on, both on the battlefield and the endless streams of text that frame it, to the point that it's all too easy to miss a mission-critical SOS that renders the most recent checkpoint unusable. In one mission, we were given three seemingly vital objectives in the space of ten seconds and no indication of which was the most important. We had to restart another level for failing to stop a handful of enemies from taking the allied base because we were focusing instead on the giant dragon gobbing fireballs at it. *Hyrule Warriors* may make you feel incredibly powerful, but Legends mode frequently makes you feel like quite the inadequate leader.

Thankfully, while Legends may take top billing – occupying the first slot on the menu – Adventure mode is bigger, pacier, and more varied. Set on an 8bit-styled world map, it is broken up into briefer missions that tinker with the formula, altering enemy damage, perhaps, or dropping you into a time-limited boss rush. Two enemies will spawn in a closed-off keep and you'll be given a *Zelda* lore hint on which one to kill. There are additions to the cast and more powerful weapons for its existing members too, with grading and item systems to encourage replays. Every great *Zelda* game has been an adventure, so it's appropriate that the mode of the same name just about rescues *Hyrule Warriors*.

It's tempting to dismiss this as just another new *Warriors* game, but Nintendo has not given the keys to one of the most revered series in gaming to Koei Tecmo and Omega Force just to swell their output further. This is a *Zelda* game, and the sight of Link and company on the boxart carries with it a certain expectation. It's one *Hyrule Warriors* fails to match, but there's still plenty to admire, not least the way its makers have flouted nearly 30 years of convention, treating one of Nintendo's most prized assets in ways it would never dare to. The game's greatest achievement is the way it recasts characters who have long been portrayed as being in need of a young boy's help. The next time we see Zelda being dragged away by Ganon's forces, we'll wonder why she can't just fight her way out of trouble. After all, we've seen her do it hundreds of times before.

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LEFT Omega's cast addition, the anime-styled Lana, is a sorceress who specialises in magical barriers. Her alternative weapon is a spear, with a special attack that crushes foes by summoning a Deku Tree. **MAIN** Combat takes a while to get going: each character starts with a handful of attack strings, and must craft badges to unlock more. **BOTTOM** While grunts can be mashed to oblivion, bigger enemies are most effectively dispatched by revealing, then depleting, a Weak Point meter. Gohma needs an arrow to the face, naturally





ABOVE Ganondorf is absurdly powerful from the moment you first lay hands on him, but he exposes one of the biggest weaknesses in *Hyrule Warriors*' setup. You also have to face him, and he's a total walkover



The Walking Dead: Season Two

Whether in print or onscreen, The Walking Dead has always been at its best when demonstrating that the greatest threat to your wellbeing in a zombie-infested world is not the undead, but your fellow survivors. Perhaps that – as well as the desire to adhere to a bimonthly release schedule – explains why Telltale has almost entirely forgone the first five-episode run's light puzzle elements to focus more heavily on narrative in this sophomore season, with exploration also pruned back. It soon becomes clear that those you consider your allies are, in fact, the most taxing puzzle of all.

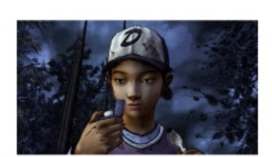
Particularly for an 11-year-old. The decision to continue with Clementine's story, casting her as the lead for the entirety of the season, is a courageous one, not least because it leads to a very different kind of player-protagonist dynamic. As Lee, we made the decisions we considered best for Clementine to help prepare her for the horrifying realities of an apocalyptic world. Now we're invited to get inside the head of an 11-year-old, a significantly different proposition. Are we thinking like Clem, or attempting to parent her again? Are we doing what she would do, or what we think she should? It raises questions about agency and empathy, but the result might just be a slight emotional distancing; we feel a stage removed from Clem because her situation is so impossible, so unknowable. We were all 11 once, but it wasn't anything like this.

Initially, however, the new locus works surprisingly well. Season opener *All That Remains* works hard to differentiate Clem from Lee, and for a time you're guiding someone who feels truly vulnerable. After so many zombie-slaying power fantasies, it's unsettling how just one or two walkers can come to represent a real threat. And yet the need to give the player some decisions to make leads to a series of increasingly contrived scenarios where a group of adults relies on a young girl for guidance. Clementine is forced to act as mediator and sent on dangerous lone missions; often she's treated not just as an equal, but as a surrogate leader. In empowering the player, Telltale also empowers its protagonist, and while it offers the odd reminder of her frailties, Clementine rarely feels as helpless as perhaps she should, however much growing up she's had to do in such a short space of time.

One key point of differentiation is a stronger sense of forward momentum in the narrative. This is partly a by-product of shorter episode length, and it works both for and against the season as a whole. One result is that the supporting cast is more lightly sketched than before (by the finale, you'll likely have forgotten two or three names of those who haven't made it that far), though that also contributes to the sense of unease, the feeling that you can never really get to know anyone – certainly not enough to be able to place absolute trust in them.

Publisher Telltale Games
Developer In-house
Format 360, Android, iOS, Ouya, PC (version tested), PS3, PS4, Vita, Xbox One
Release Out now

Clem rarely feels as helpless as she should, however much growing up she's had to do in such a short space of time



END TO END
Although this season can be enjoyed by newcomers and *The Walking Dead* veterans alike, your relationship with one character in particular will be more meaningful with prior knowledge. Otherwise, a moving sequence in the final episode is the main reward for *Season One* players – anyone hoping their choices would carry over will be disappointed. Perhaps that might change next time around: there are three wildly divergent endings that see Clementine left in very different positions, depending entirely on two choices made in the last act of the final episode.

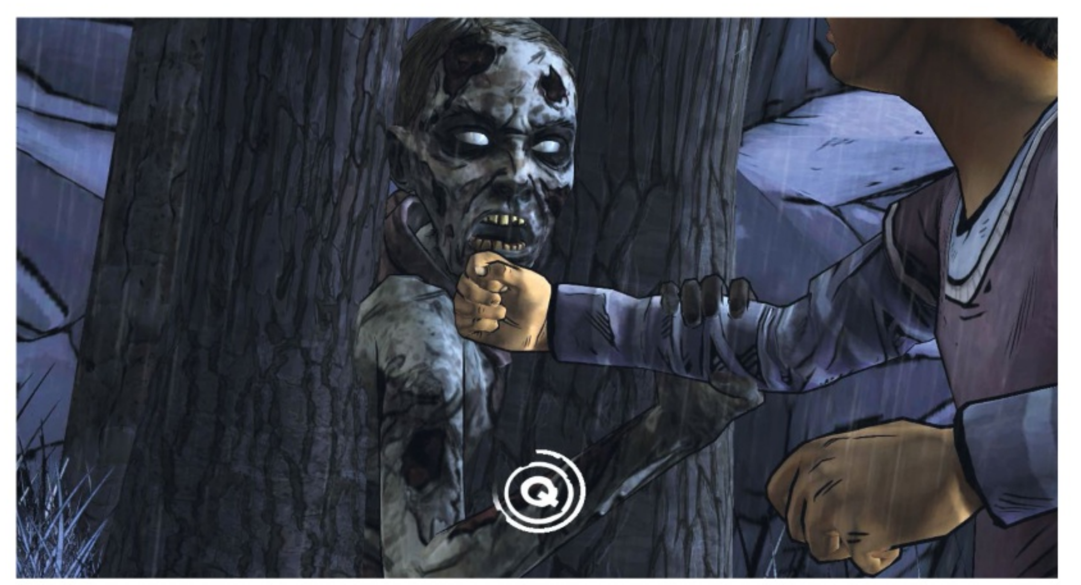
As such, there are dramatic moments that don't always seem to grow organically from the characters, but from the needs of the plot. Sudden emotional outbursts feel forced, a clumsy way to stimulate conflict; people make unlikely, reckless decisions, their behaviour out of character with previous actions. Formerly friendly characters will round on Clem for no good reason, most notably in one late-game volte-face, which wouldn't make much sense if Clem was an adult, let alone a scared child trying to do the right thing. Telltale's writers cull minor cast members brutally once they've outlived their usefulness, at times for no reason greater than that it's been too long since the previous shocking death or big emotional set-piece. And there are also moments where it's clearer than ever that whatever choice you make is not going to be enough to save a life: the Grim Reaper's scythe hangs more visibly over certain heads than at any point in *Season One*.

And yet, in preventing Clem from getting too close to anyone, this is a more consistently nerve-wracking season, with a stronger focus on human relationships falling apart under strain, on emotional rather than physical violence. As groups are forced together by circumstance, distrust and unease nibbles away at already-frayed psyches, and there's rarely a moment to relax. The trouble with this is that while the journey might be unpredictable, it leaves you grasping to attach yourself to a single fulfilling narrative arc. Episode four is the weakest to date, finishing on a cliffhanger that aims to match its *Season One* equivalent for shock value, but can't come close to its emotional impact.

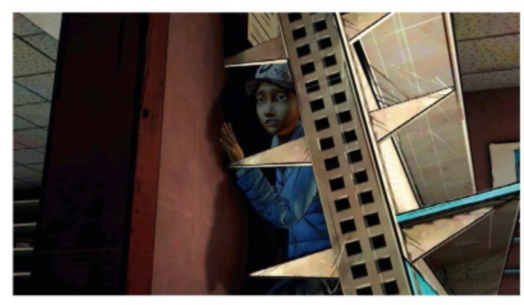
It's rescued by an outstanding finale that satisfies on several different levels. There's the first moment of real warmth, one of this season's few pauses for thought, and an opportunity to get to know the group. As Clem, you finally feel something close to a sense of belonging, one she hasn't experienced since Lee. Naturally, it's the calm before the storm, though this time your decisions have a significant impact on the narrative, rather than choosing between two paths that lead to the same destination. At last, a subplot that has been simmering throughout the season comes to the boil, making it plain what this run has really been about.

And the 'right' thing to do seems harder than ever to gauge, particularly in one agonising late-game choice where both paths feel equally regrettable. If it's less affecting than the heartbreaking climax of the previous arc, it might rattle uncomfortably around your mind for a little longer. An uneven season finishes on a high that just about rescues what came before, and at its best this is every bit as brutal and draining as its forerunner. So long as you're prepared to be put through the wringer again, *The Walking Dead* remains one of the most gripping adventures around.

7



LEFT Telltale is mostly happy to retread old ground during action sequences, relying on QTE button mashing. They're well framed, but otherwise the least engaging bits. **BELOW** Mike is among the most likeable members of the new group. He's responsible for a few all-too-rare moments of levity during episode four, and gets the funniest line of the entire series. **MAIN** Some will recognise Bonnie from bonus episode *400 Days*, but of the new cast members it's Carver, voiced with menacing relish by Michael Madsen, who makes the biggest impact



ABOVE *Season Two* is restless, rarely content to let its cast stay in any one place for too long. One stop in particular seems to carry plenty of dramatic potential, but then it's hurriedly abandoned after but a single episode





Infamous: First Light

Sucker Punch's standalone *Infamous: Second Son* prequel fleshes out the origin story of Delsin Rowe's antagonist-turned-sidekick, Fetch, which naturally means it also focuses on its parent game's most enjoyable superpower, Neon. Fetch moves around the city with even greater momentum than Rowe, taking advantage of the newly introduced Neon Clouds, which accelerate her to incredible speeds. And once you've fully upgraded Fetch – which, thanks to the compact nature of this package, doesn't take long at all – she can leap across huge gaps, dash through the air, and make short work of high-rise buildings. Simply moving around *First Light*'s Seattle is a moreish pleasure.

Fetch is similarly capable in combat, too, with a mix of powers lifted from *Second Son* along with a clutch of new ones, such as Enslave – which makes enemies fight for you for a short time – and a powerful melee finisher that propels you into enemies and is recharged by using standard melee attacks. *First Light* takes the best of *Second Son*'s combat and amplifies it.

But the game also benefits from increased focus. *First Light* plays out on a cut-down version of the first game's Seattle map, and trims away much of *Second Son*'s fat. There's still a handful of side missions, but they offer more emergent gameplay. Finding a drone, for example, requires you to hack the onboard camera in order to figure out where it is, while drug-deal shutdowns are replaced by drive-by shootings in which a car full of heavies targets you directly.

Even the graffiti is better this time around. You still have to wrestle with the DualShock's accelerometers, but the pictures only take one pass to finish and result in burned-in fluorescent defacements that feel worth the effort. Best of all are the Lumen Races, which barely disguise their *Rayman* influence, sending you dashing across the city in pursuit of a fast-moving glowing orb. These orbs can also be found around the city and yield Skill Points, which you can use to upgrade yourself. While there are other ways to gain SP, the switch in focus makes far better use of the city's architecture and encourages you to explore this version of Seattle rather than simply dash to the next objective.

But despite all that, *First Light* has inherited some of *Second Son*'s design failings. Seattle still feels empty and sterile, mission design often lacks imagination, and climbing without powers – something you're forced to do during a misjudged section later on – remains painful. *First Light*'s surface beauty doesn't conceal much depth, then, but in distilling the *Infamous* template into a much more manageable and less fatiguing proposition, its successes drown out its flaws.



Publisher SCE
Developer Sucker Punch Productions
Format PS4
Release Out now



FIGHT CLUB

First Light also introduces Arena battles, which pit you (and your growing array of powers) against waves of enemies. Missions come in two flavours, survival and rescue, the latter requiring to you dash about the room saving hostages before enemies kill them. If you have *Second Son* installed, you can also play as Delsin, using his broader range of powers. Scores are posted to global leaderboards, and a list of challenges allows you to earn more SP for the main game.



Focusing on Fetch has allowed Sucker Punch to further explore its best powerset, Neon, and the introduction of brand-new visual effects makes *Infamous: First Light* even prettier than the already handsome *Second Son*




T3
Apple Special
iPhone 6
+ Watch
iPhone 6 and 6 Plus tested
Hands-on with Apple Watch
IN PRINT, ON TABLET AND SMARTPHONE
ON SALE 30.09
Google play
App Store
zinio
GOOGLE GLASS EVOLVES
'NEW DESIGNER MODELS ON TEST
WEARABLE TECH REVOLUTION
MOTO 360 EXCLUSIVE
SAMSUNG GEAR S
SONY SMARTWEAR
Get Yourself
Connected
53 Wireless Upgrades To Change Your Life

Theatrhythm Final Fantasy: Curtain Call

For once, there's an air of resolution about a *Final Fantasy* game. Producer Ichiro Hazama has hinted the *Theatrhythm* template could be applied to other series, but *Curtain Call* is comprehensive enough to make a direct follow-up irrelevant. The original looks miserly next to the 221 songs here, and with over 60 characters to add to your party, more options than anyone could ever need, and a wealth of trophies and unlockables that only the most dedicated players will get close to exhausting, few sequels are so generous.

Its tracklist is split between up-tempo Battle and gentler Field stages, with nostalgic but comparatively dull Event stages relegated to an occasional sideshow. Again, you're tasked with hitting rhythmic markers as they scroll by while your party ambles along a path or faces off against a series of monsters. The structure has changed, however: from the start, you can now choose to play any stage from the 25-plus featured *FF* games across any of the three difficulty modes, or tackle a Quest Medley, a branching map where each node contains a song, and its terminus yields crystal shards, your currency for unlocking new party members.

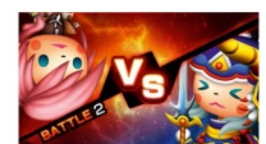
Curtain Call doesn't fix what wasn't broken about its predecessor, nor mend what was. It's too easy to get S rank or higher on Expert, even with several misses, and the game is inconsistent about the timing that defines a Critical hit. Neither control scheme is ideal: stylus swipes are all too often misread, but there's too much travel on 3DS's analogue nub to shift between diagonal cues rapidly, and if an undulating line cue ends in a directional marker you're forced to remove your thumb a split-second early before pushing it in the right direction, lest it be misinterpreted as an early input.

Like the awkward portmanteau in its title, the game's fusion of rhythm-action and RPG never quite fits as neatly as you'd hope. As Quest Medleys get tougher, you might use items to refill your health bar or increase the likelihood of a rare loot drop, but there's no real strategy involved. Each level increase is adorably celebrated by your crew of marionettes, but these tiny stat boosts feel meaningless. And fudging your way to success with a series of items feels a lot like cheating; besides, if you're good enough, you'll hit enough Greats and Criticals to pass a stage without injury.

Still, as a celebration of the works of Messrs Uematsu, Sakimoto, Hamauzu and co, this farewell tour pulls out all the stops; an ageing supergroup playing not just its greatest hits but its B-sides, too, as well as some little-heard obscurities from the early days. It may not win any new fans, but it's an encore that will earn warm applause from the devoted.

6

Publisher Square Enix
Developer Indieszero
Format 3DS
Release Out now



MELEE MELODIES
A new Versus mode allows you to compete against others in Battle stages. Hitting markers fills a Burst gauge, which will automatically trigger effects on your foe's screen. One changes the size of each cue, another randomises their speed, a third breaks your chain if you hit any cue with less than Critical timing. If you aren't near a Wi-Fi point, you can tackle a series of increasingly challenging AI foes, though you won't get to trade ProfiCards, which may grant bonus Quest Medley maps.

Spinoffs are better represented than before, with themes from the oft-forgotten *Mystic Quest*, *Final Fantasy Fables: Chocobo's Dungeon*, and even idiosyncratic Wii title *Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles: The Crystal Bearers*



CounterSpy

Suave, daring, cool-headed in a crisis: everything the archetypal '60s spy should be. From the very moment that *CounterSpy*'s title card fades to be replaced by reverb-drenched guitar, blarting brass and a Saul Bass-esque sequence, Dynamighty tilts its lowball in your direction and demonstrates two of those qualities in abundance. In seconds, the atmosphere is set, a Saturday morning cartoon take on the precipitous tensions of the Cold War. Your mission: to infiltrate procedurally generated bases on each side of the conflict to steal missile plans for your agency, C.O.U.N.T.E.R..

That objective will take you on a tour of military complexes across parodies of the US and USSR, each dressed with piquant wit by ex-Pixar artist Mark Cordell Holmes and viewed primarily side-on as you sneak through vents, dodge cameras and snap necks. But *CounterSpy* is enamoured of classic Bond lair shootouts, too, providing both cover spots for 3D wet work and enough exploding barrels, gantries and gas tanks to satiate even the most carnage-hungry agent.

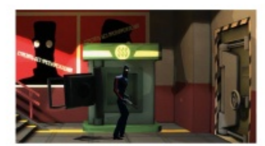
It creates another uneasy standoff, but one that works well at first, a stealth bonus multiplier rewarding a cautious approach until everything goes to hell, and then a streak one upping the points for shooting your way out as efficiently as possible. Until, that is, things hit crisis point, and *CounterSpy* loses its head.

Ragdolling bodies are subject to clipping issues – a guard pulled silently from a high ledge might dangle an arm through the platform where he comes to rest – and the trickle of explosive firearms into the clumsy hands of the fast-proliferating guards makes flying corpses ubiquitous. Gunplay grows increasingly loud and chaotic, and since many fights aren't optional, that makes stealth tricky at best. It's further complicated by the fickle AI, which will often deduce your presence from any disturbance, including a clipping limb, and radio it in. The host nation's persistent DEFCON level then rises until the radio operator is silenced, or a campaign-ending countdown is initiated. In response, you'll have to scrabble across silos like Maxwell Smart, facechecking into camera paths and rifle barrels – with surveillance and death both ways to boost the DEFCON level further. The implementation of anti-headshot helmets frustrates, too, the extra bullets required to put these marks down all but certain to break your stealth chain, even when saved for last and silently eliminated.

It's a cascade of missteps that needlessly sabotages the late game, and every difficulty above Normal. A patch could fix so much – after all, Dynamighty's blueprint for greatness is plain to see. Unlike a good spy, however, it flubs its final execution.


6

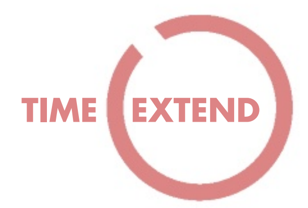
Publisher SCE
Developer Dynamighty
Format Android, iOS, PS3, PS4 (version tested), Vita
Release Out now



AVENUE Q
As well as reshuffling rooms, the game's algorithm deploys safes containing formulae that unlock single-mission boosts, blueprints for new guns, and intel to sell on for cash (another outlet for Dynamighty's satirical eye). The best drop, however, is not random. Beat the score set by another player in one mission and their corpse will be secreted in the next, ready to loot. Cash is scarce, especially since ammo is expensive, so the bonus vastly ratchets up the satisfaction of outdoing your friends.

White-uniformed officers are cowards, able to be coerced into lowering the DEFCON level by one when isolated. Explosive friendly fire later on means the skill is usually more in keeping them alive than wiping out their goons





Binary Domain



Yakuza Studio's characterful actioner deserved better than the scrapheap

By Chris Schilling

Publisher/developer Sega (Yakuza Studio) **Format** 360, PC, PS3 **Release** 2012

The emergence of the thirdperson shooter became one of the defining trends of the 360/PS3 generation. It wasn't so much the dominance of the genre itself as the shift it represented, the likes of Epic Games' *Gears Of War* and Naughty Dog's *Uncharted* held up as examples of the west's superior technological firepower. Yet there's an irony to the pervading influence of Epic's testosterone-fuelled blaster, given lead designer Cliff Bleszinski's acknowledgment of Namco's *Kill Switch* and Capcom's *Resident Evil 4* as chief inspirations – a game born in North Carolina, but with roots in Japan, came to symbolise the disparity between western and eastern development.

Released almost six years after *Gears*, *Binary Domain* was hastily written off as an example of a Japanese studio belatedly attempting to clamber aboard a bandwagon that had all but disappeared over the horizon. By then, the 'stop and pop' cover-shooter template was looking tired; indeed, Namco's *Quantum Theory* represented such a nadir that reviewers joked about setting up a support group. By any commonly accepted criteria for success, *Binary Domain* was a failure – its ingloriously swift departure from the charts was accompanied by a collective critical shrug. Yet to play it again is to experience a deceptively intelligent game rich with ideas and potential, one that was too readily dismissed by a market that felt like it had seen it all before.

If its opening hour seemed to live down to expectations in 2012, another playthrough makes its gentle subversions easier to spot. It's 2080, and in a world devastated by climate change, governments have developed robots to build new cities on the ruins of the old ones. A multicultural crew is sent to arrest a Japanese scientist accused of breaching Clause 21 of the New Geneva Convention, which bans the creation of Hollow Children: androids so lifelike that even they aren't aware of their origins.

At first, protagonist Dan Marshall appears to be little more than a boorish, smug American marine, while partner Roy 'Big Bo' Boateng resembles an inadvertent parody of just about every black sidekick you've ever seen in a game. Yet there's some method in its stereotypical madness. The pair soon rendezvous with Brits Charlie and Rachael, both of whom are similarly aloof and cynical about their forced partnership with their noisy American counterparts, while Faye, a Chinese sniper, is archetypally polite and accommodating. Later, they meet Kurosawa, an honourable and industrious Japanese detective. There's a comedic tinge to the first uneasy interactions, but gradually each character learns to acclimatise to, respect and even embrace the others' cultural idiosyncrasies. Dan's early remarks are abrasive, ignorant and sometimes borderline racist, but by the end of the game he's far more tolerant and more likeable as a result. So often we're asked to identify with protagonists who are no different from title card to end credits, whereas over the course of a dozen hours, *Binary Domain*'s characters develop.

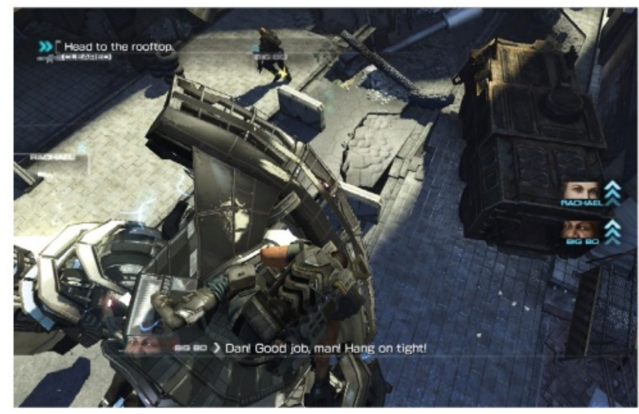
And it's not merely narrative contrivances that see these relationships change over time: *Binary Domain* also makes a concerted attempt to involve its mechanics in the story by way of a voice-triggered consequence system. The idea is that the commands Dan gives in combat, and the replies he gives during downtime, will determine how much the members of Rust Squad trust you. There's a laudable array of possible responses (around 75 in total) and although the voice recognition is sketchy, you can choose from up to four context-sensitive options via the controller.

True, it's not until the later stages that the trust mechanic has a meaningful impact on the story, but on a moment-to-moment basis there is something wonderfully empowering about your ability to maximise the combat effectiveness of the group with your decisions. At times, you'll have to take calculated risks: if you're injured, you can yell for assistance, but if your partner is attacked while giving you a shot of adrenaline then they'll be less likely to help you out next time. Sometimes you might have to offend one character to win the support of another, while some are more responsive to praise than others. Shouts of encouragement from Rachael are all the more rewarding for the effort you've made to earn them, although you can also ►



subvert the system should you take a dislike to any of your squad. It's not for the easily frustrated, though: the system will pick up a number of profanities, which in our case prompted yet more withering sarcasm from Charlie. Not even declaring our undying affection on every possible occasion thereafter could win him over. We understand: Brits are a pretty cynical bunch, after all. Luckily, we're also very creative when it comes to swearwords.

There's always a tangible sense of feedback to your actions, and that's what makes the combat enjoyable. You face a variety of robot enemies in a range of scenarios, from careful advances through sniper-lined streets to intense close-quarters battles against prototype Hollow Children – fast-moving robot zombies – that stray into survival-horror territory.



Predating *Titanfall* by two years, this early boss is a bipedal mech that you take down by jumping from a rooftop onto its head and blasting its energy core as it bucks to shake you off

rousing sensation of force and weight to the best sidearms. Dan's assault rifle is the only weapon of his you can upgrade, but you'll relish the opportunity to switch to the thunderous pump-action shotgun, or the SMG, whose volleys resonate with a clattering racket that sounds like a power drill rattling around inside a metal pan.

As your mission sees you climb through the ruins of Shibuya to the upper strata of a

THE STORY ENDEAVOURS TO TACKLE SOME WEIGHTY THEMES, SUCH AS PLAYING GOD AND WHAT IT MEANS TO BE HUMAN

These "scrap heads", as the Rust Squad derogatorily calls them, are as unaffected by the loss of limbs as they are by the haze of metallic shards that fills the air as your bullets shear away their breastplates. They duck into cover as you charge up an immobilising shock burst, and flank you if you don't thin out their numbers quickly. Remove their firing arm and they kneel to pick it up with the hand that remains; shoot both legs out and they still crawl forward before lunging at your ankles. Headshots are recommended, and not just because they earn more credits for upgrading weapons or equipping nanomachines that provide an array of offensive or defensive buffs; a headless enemy can no longer tell friend from foe, and starts firing on their own kind.

While your arsenal tends towards the generic, the gunfeel is excellent. There's a

pristine, robot-constructed future Tokyo, the story endeavours to tackle some weighty themes, touching upon ideas of playing God, what it means to be human and even – in some truly discomforting scenes where Hollow Children come to realise their identities – notions of racial purity. Cutscenes, however, are short and sharply directed, and if the result is that the narrative occasionally pulls punches, lacking the space to explore its themes fully, it's to the undoubted advantage of the action.

The initial scene setting is punctuated with a couple of exciting boss fights, but it's with the arrival of CN-7 'Cain', a flamboyant French robot sporting a red neckerchief and a USB connector in his finger, that the game hits its stride, in its element when providing escapist thrills and corny one-liners in equal measure. Heroic sacrifices, twist



TOP **Though underdeveloped, *Binary Domain* examines the class struggle of future Tokyo.** ABOVE **Failing a QTE results in an inglorious – often amusing – death for Dan**



ROBOT INVASION

By replacing robot opponents with human targets, *Binary Domain*'s multiplayer component lacks the campaign's satisfying feedback. Its sole saving grace is the cooperative Invasion mode – its Horde equivalent – which may be uninspired in concept, but is thoroughly well executed. As you and up to three human partners tackle 50 waves of robot enemies, the relative paucity of ammo enforces teamwork and encourages efficient takedowns, favouring headshots, close-range shotgun blasts or desperate melee swipes as a last resort. It's a pity it requires such a significant time commitment. You'll need to have reached a high level to have a fighting chance of progressing past wave ten, and there's no mid-game save – you have to complete all 50 waves in a sitting.

betrayals and death-defying leaps in slow motion: you'll either roll your eyes or feel yourself break into a broad grin.

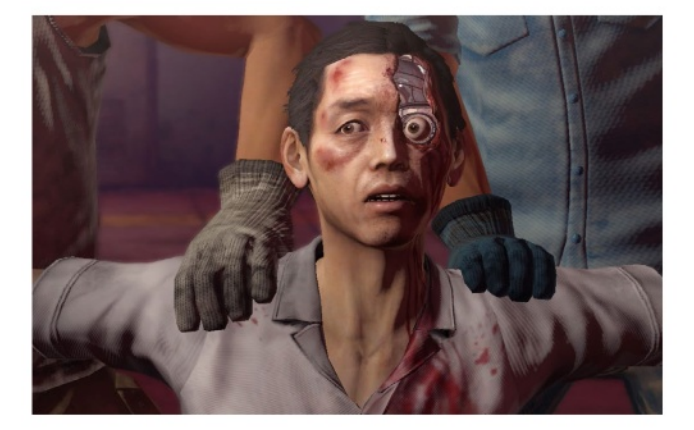
Between Chapters Three and Five the game breaks into a sprint, giving you just enough time to catch your breath between set-pieces. Its pacing, humour and sheer wide-eyed exuberance allow it to rise above ideas that lean heavily on genre cliché: vehicle sequences are explosive but never outstay their welcome, while the use of QTEs is uncommonly restrained. Even its most hackneyed ideas – such as holding off waves of enemies while allies open a door – are elevated by the quality of the gunplay, the rising crescendos of the soundtrack, and the encouraging shouts of your teammates.

By this stage, Cain will almost certainly have become a permanent sidekick, if only for his enthusiastic soundbites ("Words fail to express your magnificence," he purrs). Overcoming adversity rarely feels quite this triumphant. And by the time you reach the Armada Corporation, via yet another exhilarating boss fight, Toshihiro Nagoshi and team have earned enough goodwill that a climactic exposition dump and a corny misjudgment of an epilogue are easily forgiven.

Unfortunately, the same can't be said of a multiplayer component that smacks of contractual obligation: it's clear within minutes that the studio's heart isn't in it. As such, it's impossible not to consider what might have been. Had resources not been shifted to multiplayer, could the campaign have been tightened up further?

We'll never know whether a sequel could have made good on *Binary Domain*'s undoubted promise. With Sega unsure how to market the game, the publisher's apathy was reflected by abysmal North American sales of fewer than 20,000 copies in its first month, an ignominious end for a game that dared to try to bridge the cultural gap.

Yet for a small-but-vocal cult following, this inventive shooter won't be so easily forgotten. It's a rare game that attempts to combine blockbuster action with thematic smarts, but it's also a game where you'll battle an apparently invincible mechanoid gorilla alongside a camp French robot that only stops firing to compliment you on your aim. You just don't get that sort of thing in *Gears Of War*. ■





LEFT **The tone is often light-hearted, though there's a grim early scene where a Hollow Child is pushed too far by a bullying yakuza.** BELOW **Yuki, a teen courier for smuggler Mifune, helps to guide the Rust Crew through underground Tokyo**

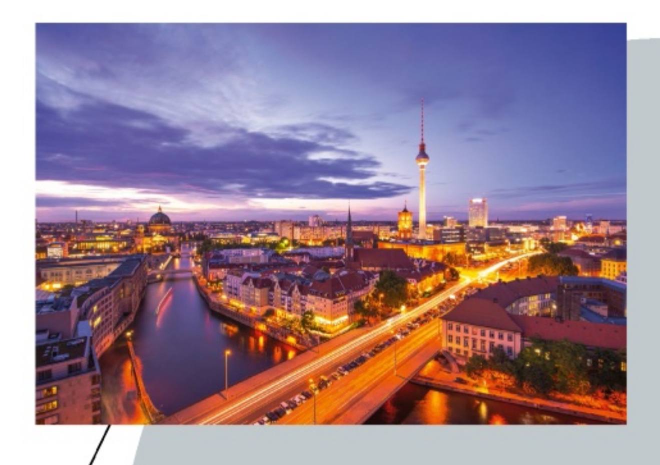
Region Specific: Berlin

How Germany's eclectic capital is drawing game talent to the very heart of the nation

In **E**267, we visited Hamburg to check in on its thriving, online-game-focused development scene. Germany's other development hub, Berlin, has had similar success in the browser and F2P markets, but many of the city's studios have recently turned their attentions to mobile games and are proving every bit as successful there, too. The scene is growing fast, as cheap, plentiful office space and low living costs draw more and more international companies to the area. We start by spending some time taking in the atmosphere (1) (p124), before speaking to some of the region's leading developers (2) (p126) about a culture of fearlessness in the face of failure. Then it's off to *Spec Ops: The Line* creator Yager (3) (p130), the elder statesman of the region, and to explore mobile heavyweight Wooga's converted bread factory (4) (p132). Bigpoint (5) (p134), meanwhile, is working on a *Game Of Thrones* title to join *Dark Orbit* and its other high-end browser games, while King (6) (p136) has only just opened its Berlin studio, so we avoid the decorators while looking into what the *Candy Crush Saga* creator is planning next. Finally, we meet with two of the key people supporting the local industry at Berlin Partner and Medienboard (7) (p138), and visit Kabam (8) (p140) to see how its Berlin arm is focusing on player experience, quality assurance and communities.


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REGION SPECIFIC OVERVIEW



1



2

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

Berlin

A rapidly expanding development scene with innovation and unification at its heart

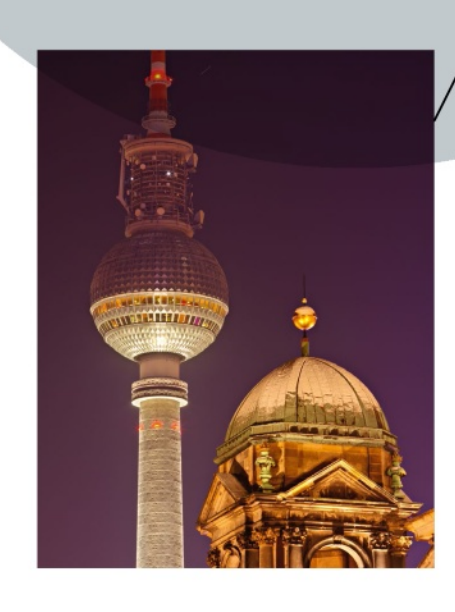


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5

4

LANDMARKS
1 Berlin is home to more than 3.5 million people. Built on the Spree river, the city is sprawling but boasts a lot of green space.
2 The Reichstag dome, added to the parliamentary building during a restoration project, was designed by Norman Foster.
3 The Brandenburg Gate is an equally iconic, though far older, landmark.
4 The East Side Gallery is a memorial to the fall of the Berlin Wall. It's 1.3km long and decorated with over 100 paintings.
5 The Fernsehturm (or Berlin TV Tower) is 368 metres tall, and looms over the rest of the city





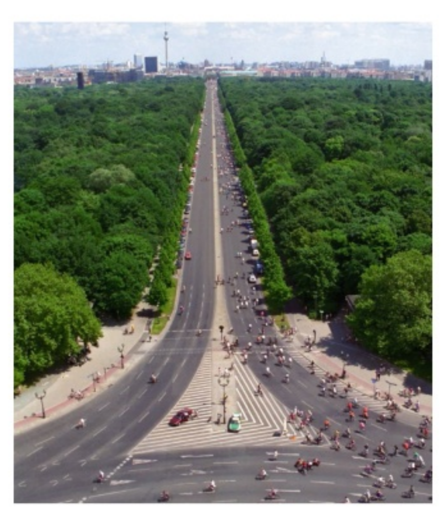
Berlin is a city defined by unification. This year it celebrates the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, a barrier that separated East from West Berlin for nearly 30 years, and in the time since the city has become an international hub for European trade, finance and politics. The videogame industry here, meanwhile, is leading the way when it comes to integrating traditional and new business models, as veteran studios rub shoulders with hugely successful mobile and browser-focused developers, exchanging staff and knowledge while a thriving startup scene swells around them.

Local studios are welcoming foreign investors too: the past two years have seen an influx of international companies looking to stake their claim in Berlin's vibrant development community. Its increasing appeal to game companies has been catalysed by a number of extremely supportive government and privately funded organisations keen to capitalise on its growth and present the location on the world stage.

One of those bodies, Medienboard Berlin Brandenburg, has been drumming up excitement for the past seven years. Founded in its current form in 2004, Medienboard offers a range of services, including project funding, and is involved in many of the industry events that take place in the region. "Berlin is a big metropolis, a city hotspot, while Brandenburg is a rural area surrounding it," Medienboard's **Ina Göring** explains. "It made sense to combine the two federal states, so we merged them. That's unique, because Berlin and Brandenburg are separate states with different politics and politicians."

Another initiative Medienboard set up is games.net, a network established in 2012 which, among other things, provides a database of those working in the local game industry. "Games.net is the most important network in the region," Goring continues. "It's under the umbrella of media.net, and we already have more than 50 companies listed. Games.net sets up a lot of networking events, helps with the exchange of ideas, and organised the Gamescom booth for Berlin Brandenburg companies. It's mainly funded by Medienboard, and we work together with them a lot."

In 2006, Medienboard set up a fund called Innovative Audio Visual Content, which was created to help developers fund their projects. The first year saw two applications, but it has since grown to be a key resource for both local startups as well as companies moving to the area. And there is more help for foreign investors from Berlin Partner, the city's economic development board, which promotes the region internationally and softens the landing for new arrivals.



The Victory Column stands at the centre of the Tiergarten to commemorate victory in the Danish-Prussian War of 1864

"We help find a location, establish what subsidies are available, help to find talent, provide information on the recruiting process, and organise tours for new employees," **Birgit Reuter**, media project manager at Berlin Partner, tells us. "We try to make the bureaucracy of moving a bit less terrible for international people! Many companies employ up to 75 per cent of their staff from other countries, and part of why I think a lot of companies come to Berlin is because it is so international and it attracts international talent."

> An atmosphere of pioneering spirit pervades every studio we visit – this is a collection of developers that's aware of its place at the fore of an evolving industry

One of those international companies is *Candy Crush Saga* creator King, which has recently opened a development studio in Berlin headed up by Gabriel Hacker, who formerly worked for Bigpoint, Take Two Interactive and Perfect World Europe. King Berlin is an autonomous studio working on mobile game prototypes for its parent company, and it's in good company. California-headquartered Kabam, one of the world's leading and most adaptive mobile game producers, has also opened an office in Berlin – albeit one focused on supporting existing projects rather than creating new ones.

"We have this really amazing mixture of creatives and technologists all trying to push boundaries in different ways, and all doing it in a city that supports that really well," **Kenneth Go**, senior director of studio operations, tells us. "And I think that's one of the best things about being in Berlin: being able to experience that energy of change, but also experience a city that is supporting it and reinforcing it in many ways. You walk down the street and every single month you'll see different things happening, whether it's different people, different cultures coming in, or shops changing. That feeling of constant change and replenishment and energy – it kind of imbibes you in your daily life and the work that you do. It gives you more energy to push forward, and to push the boundaries as well."

Bigpoint is no stranger to change, having transformed the way it approaches development in recent years, flattening its hierarchy and handing greater creative control to its team members. The Berlin office is focused on the company's core browser games, such as *Drakensang Online*, *Dark Orbit* and *Game Of Thrones*, all produced using the studio's Nebula 3 engine – tech which has been iterated over a ten year period since first powering the *Drakensang* series' retail releases. Yager's history stretches back to the '90s, too, and the studio behind *Spec Ops: The Line* and *Dead Island 2* now represents Berlin's last remaining traditional triple-A studio. But while Yager's business model might appear old-fashioned to its local peers, it's no less capable of transformation, as we discover during our visit.

It's perhaps the Berlin-founded mobile game studio Wooga that best represents the region's vibrant energy and creative churn. The company has instigated a filtering system that sees a large number of teams working on multiple projects with a view to launching only two or three of them. But while other companies might not be so explicit about it, there's an intoxicating atmosphere of pioneering spirit that pervades every studio we visit – this is a collection of developers that's very aware of its place at the forefront of an evolving industry, and one that looks set to grow at a relentless pace over the coming years. ■





NO FEAR OF FAILURE



Berlin's leading players discuss the city's vibrant startup scene and failing fast in order to innovate







Dan Olthen
Producer, *Game Of Thrones*, Bigpoint



Kenneth Go
Head of Kabam Berlin



Philipp Schellbach
Co-founder and director of development, Yager



Birgit Reuter
Project manager, media, Berlin Partner



Gabriel Hacker
Head of studio, King Berlin



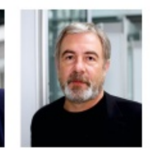
Jonathan Lyndsey
Producer, *Drakensang*, Bigpoint



Alexander Mamontov
Head of studio, Wooga



Andrea Peters
CEO, Media.net



Elmar Giglinger
CEO, Medienboard

The most striking aspect of the offices of Berlin Partner For Business And Technology, the location for today's roundtable discussion, are the elevators that move between the floors in the building's large glass atrium. Constructed of brushed steel and wood, with a hint of simplified Art Deco to their shape and design, they suggest that we're about to descend to Rapture. With no plasmids to hand, however, we rely on coffee to fuel the discussion. Gathered with us are **Kenneth Go**, head of Kabam Berlin; Yager's co-founder and director of development, **Philipp Schellbach**; head of Berlin's newly opened King studio, **Gabriel Hacker**; Bigpoint's **Jonathan Lyndsey** and **Dan Olthen**, *Drakensang* and *Game Of Thrones* producers respectively; Wooga's head of studio, **Alexander Mamontov**; Media.net CEO **Andrea Peters**; and Berlin Partner project manager **Birgit Reuter**.

One common thread that ties together all of the studios here is your willingness to take risks and embrace failure. What's behind that?

Alexander Mamontov It comes mostly from the startup scene. It's what you do – you start with an idea, you invest all of your efforts into it, and if it doesn't work, all right, I've got my knowledge, I've got my experience, I'll start something new. And here in Berlin, the startup culture is really awesome. There are many companies from Berlin, from the UK and US, from Europe; they create their startups here, and I think this also influences the local game industry. That's why we all want to fail as long as we take in all the lessons.

Philipp Schellbach We can't do that in triple-A development, of course, but we have kind of the same system within a game's development. We prototype very early, very often. 'Fail early, fail often' is something that's known to the game industry. It's your first achievement in learning; you have to fail to see what works and what doesn't and to learn the tools and so on. So actually we have kind of the same culture. It's about efficiency – if you fail early, then you're much more efficient, because you know something doesn't work, so you can do other stuff instead and not try to do something that at the end doesn't work out and has had a lot of resources wasted on it.

Kenneth Go So, at Wooga, do you have the people working on the projects making that decision, or is an unbiased party trying to support them in that decision?

AM All the decisions concerning the game are made only by the team.

KG What I found at Kabam, and maybe this is true in other companies as well, is that it's very hard. The hardest thing to do is shut down a project that you've spent countless hours working on. And to make that ultimate decision that it's not going to work out is something that you have to be very disciplined to do. Not many people are.

AM Yeah, it's a big challenge with many parts to think about because, as you say, you work on a project for several months and if you stop it you wonder what's going to happen to you. First of all, the team should be really transparent, and they should have a clear role, they should know they're working on a potential hit game, they should question themselves always. Secondly, they should not be afraid of losing their job after a project has stopped. And the more projects you start, the more common it becomes. It's a difficult system, and we've been working on it for a very long time to establish this culture, and we still are. We introduced Lab Time so that people who weren't on a project could learn new skills, and feel like their job is safe.

Gabriel Hacker ... comes into play as well – trying to find good solutions like Lab Time that you mentioned. And also within King, we grew quite a lot in the past two years, and we now have studios all across Europe and we acquired Nonstop Games. There are opportunities for people to work on something else, even when a project has been stopped or cancelled. But innovation is key to that, and started this whole 'let's fail fast' culture.

Jonathan Lyndsey I think we learned a lot from the web industries, right? For years, they've tried stuff, tested it, and if it doesn't work out they stop it and go and try something else. And games haven't worked like that for very long, right? Only in the past couple of years have we seriously been doing that. A lot of the most interesting blogs you can read about how to optimise and how to fail fast aren't from the game industry. We're still miles behind, actually!

DO I think we're learning from different types of industries. For instance, game entry tutorial. The other day I was at a restaurant, sitting there on the terrace, but they had this concierge kind of guy and he was welcoming every single customer. Each customer was made to feel special. I was watching how he was working, how he was treating the customers and making them feel good the moment they stepped onto the terrace. This is how game entry should be. It's how we have to create our games for every single user in order to create this special experience. I start *Candy Crush* and it says, 'Hey, Dan, it's good to see you back. We prepared this and this for you today. Do you just want to invest a *little* bit of your money to create a better experience?' I'm like, 'Oh, yeah, that game knows me – of course!' That is nice, that's a great experience. And this is where we can learn from our surroundings. We're making games for people, and playing games is one of the most basic human instincts. As long as we look at our human nature, that's where we can make all of our customers happy and treat them like people and not just paying users.

"As long as we look at our human nature, that's where we can make all of our customers happy and treat them like people and not just paying users"

Dan Olthen One of our philosophies is fail fast, too. It's like, OK, there's a feature, let's prototype it on paper, with Lego or whatever. And we test it out, and if we're happy, it gets to the next stage until it eventually gets into the game – or not. Everything gets a postmortem. If it worked, why did it work? If it didn't, why not? What can we do better? We also look into what we're doing with people – we want to retain talent; we want to offer them a chance to grow within the company. It helps with loyalty, and I really truly believe that we have to invest in those great people.

Gabriel Hacker Absolutely. And we *have* to fail fast because we have to innovate. The time to market is crucial, so we have to be fast. It's one of King's core values – to be fast, to be problem solvers, and to get things done. And in order to innovate you need to fail because otherwise you won't find the gold nugget you're looking for. You need to find that fun core gameplay loop that hooks people for hours, months or years, and you can't find that by simply writing a design spec and then working according to that. This is something that I guess every game company needs to learn, and I agree with Ken when he says that it can be tough on the team. But then I guess management

Elmar Giglinger I love the game industry's embrace of failure, because so far there is no culture of failure in Germany. Most often in Germany, if you fail, you're out. We *need* a culture of failure here.

DO It's about learning. Like Supercell – they open a bottle of champagne when they fail because they learned something. But just as important is doing a postmortem of what you did. Spoken word may not stay in everyone's minds, so document it and make it available to everyone – kind of like a wiki. Put it there, make it visible for the entire company and spread the knowledge, because other projects might face the same difficulties. We all want to make better games and create better experiences, and if we keep the common-sense knowledge super secret, then nobody with profit from that.

Does the internationalism of Berlin help grow that knowledge pool?

DO When other companies started coming to Berlin, I heard the panic of, "Oh my god, King's coming!" or, "Kabam's coming – oh, no, let's run!" Well, OK, the first reaction is, 'Oh my god, what's happening?' but then you realise that it's getting interesting for international talent to come here. And this is where we'll all profit as we get people from everywhere. Maybe you'll spend a year with King, and then go to Bigpoint and then Wooga. As we grow talent, everyone benefits.

JL If you go back to a year ago on *Drakensang*, I think there was one person who wasn't from Germany on the team, and now there are more than ten – so I guess about 20 per cent of the team. Previously it was quite difficult to get people from the UK, Italy, France or the US to move to Berlin. Berlin has been a cool place to go for hipsters and arty people for quite a long time, but now it appeals to everyone. You can see that from the amount of stag nights in Berlin now! [Laughter.] But we have a much bigger pot of people to choose from now, and the more companies you have, the more we all benefit.

Andrea Peters How about your relationships with local universities? Do you work closely with them?

JL Some of our people teach there part time, and we offer internships to the students that we think are really good.

PS Same for us, and we have a couple of really good guys who were from Game Academy.

AM We also work with students, and we have people from Finland and all over Europe. The only way to get more talented people is to teach and share the knowledge.

Despite the success here, there's a good deal of modesty. Why do you think that is?

KG I think that's more of a European thing, at least from my perspective. I can compare and contrast a little bit from the Valley versus coming to Berlin. And it's definitely refreshing to come to this area. When we first moved here, all the people here were very kind to us and showed us around, helped us set up, showed us their offices and shared knowledge. I don't think I would get the same kind of welcome in San Francisco.

PS I think it's also about the culture. Because in the US they often in the past tried to push more in the direction of Hollywood – there's a star designer or game programmer – and that's not common here. We're more focused on the team because we know that it's the team that does the work, not just one person who does everything right.

GH Of course, we do compete to some extent, because what we're fighting for is players' time. But it's also communicated by the management team as well – since I joined King, I've never heard Riccardo [Zacconi, CEO] talking about the competition in senior management meetings. We're completely focused on what we're doing, and completely focused on the teams, as Philipp mentioned, rather than looking at what other people are doing. For us, that's not important.

Berlin appears to be in a state of flux. Do you think this sort of constant change fits particularly well with game development?

DO Definitely, yeah. It fits with the industry: it's fast evolving, creative, and there's a 'make something out of nothing' attitude, which actually comes from a historical point of view. Back living in Eastern Berlin, you *had* to make something out of nothing, and this is what you can feel from Berlin's culture – it just spills over into the industry, and goes hand in hand.

KG I think all the things that we talked about are creating this perfect storm that allows companies to be successful. So you have the really easy ability to recruit high-quality talent from all over Europe with support from the government. You have a lot of creative, highly qualified individuals all coming together in the city at the same time. You have a culture that's about change. And you have a lot of great companies that are coming here from elsewhere and bringing their expertise. That's going to spread across the companies already here, and it's just a matter of time before you have even more success built on top of that.

"A lot of the things that happened in San Francisco about 20 years ago are starting to happen in Berlin because of all the different effects of the environment"



That's one of the unique things that I've seen in Berlin compared to San Francisco: I feel like a lot of the things that happened in San Francisco about 20 years ago are starting to happen in Berlin because of all of these different effects of the environment. San Francisco's already past that; it's too competitive, too high cost, it's a little bit played out. But Berlin is building, and that's why people are coming here now and it's only a matter of time until you have a huge major success just like in the Valley.

What about the cost of living here?

EG In Berlin, some people have been complaining about rising prices as the euro is not worth what it was a year ago. But when I looked at the prices here and compared them to Munich and Hamburg, and also internationally with cities like London, Paris and New York, we're still not bad.

AM There is definitely a trend of rising prices, but when you compare the cost of living today with the places you just mentioned, it's still low.

JL A friend of mine got a job in Shepherds Bush, and he was struggling to find a flat. It would

cost £1,600 for a flat big enough for him and his wife – about 80 square metres or something. You can find the same in Berlin for half of that. It's maybe not going to be in the centre, but it doesn't have to be because the transport system here is awesome. Berlin is the capital of Germany and pretty much the economic capital of Europe, and yet it's half the price of almost all the other major cities.
KG I wonder if that has something to do with the culture of embracing failure, because in a high-cost city if you fail you don't have enough money to fail again! [Laughter.] Some people tell me they have friends who are paying €80 a month for a flat, and if you're paying next to nothing for a place you don't have to worry whether your project is going to be successful. You have the luxury of not worrying about paying for your basic costs!

What about governmental support here for existing and new companies?
KG For us, it was great. I think it's a different question for someone who's from Germany versus someone from outside. As a foreigner coming in, not speaking the language, there's probably no way that we could've done what we did without the help of Berlin Partner, Birgit and everyone. And I think the main thing was creating this community in Berlin as well – I don't know if it would exist if we didn't have these organisations. So when we came, Birgit did a great job of introducing us to other gaming companies in the industry, and they were also very welcoming to us. It was a nice feeling coming into Berlin. It wasn't like, "Oh, the Americans are coming!" It was, "We'll help you in any way possible. If you have any problems you only need to ask. Here are the people you can talk to who've done something similar". So it was a really nice, warm welcome, and we felt very supported, and I think that's very important for an international company.
Birgit Reuter Mainly we've dealt with international companies so far in the games sector – I think 80 per cent of the companies we support are from abroad.
GH You were also very supportive for us. You we're in contact with King before I even joined! Andrea and Games.net immediately invited me to their breakfast where I met other game companies, but then you also, for example, help ex-pats so that they could apply for a visa very fast. So there was a lot of help involved in setting up the studio – the decision to set up the studio in Berlin was made by the end of last



year, and two days ago we had our opening party. It was a very short time, and without Medianboard, Games.net and Berlin Partner we couldn't have done it.
EG When you look purely at the numbers, there's no other region in Germany that's putting as much effort and money into the videogame industry as Berlin. From our side, for the last year, around €1.5bn was invested in new content and projects, events and games awards, Gamesweek, Games.net, etc.

A lot of developers with experience at more traditional studios are moving here to work on browser and mobile games, which is something we've seen happening a lot elsewhere, too. What's your take on that shift?
PS I think it's also to do with the time frame, because most of the bigger triple-A studios were established in the '90s, so we were the only one in Berlin back then. Now we see more and more browser and mobile companies coming and they're bringing a lot of money, of course, and that's why I guess, especially in Berlin, it's now more attractive for these kind of companies to move here. I wouldn't expect any triple-A company to open up a studio in Berlin today. Also, the triple-A market is separated, so there's not much growth any more. If you really want to grow, you have to go to that mobile space.
JL In terms of hiring people from other regions, like the US for example, the work culture here's really different. You don't see anything like the tons of crunch that you'd see in the US, and you don't have this pattern of expanding a project, then letting people go, and then rehiring a bunch of them for the next one. That's the business plan for a lot of studios in the States – and the world, actually – and you just can't get away with that stuff in Germany. I think Bigpoint is the only games company in Europe that has this Betriebsrat, or workers' council. It's basically a workers' union, but more like a council. They have co-determination on management-level decisions. At the start it was super difficult, but now it works very well. It gives a certain amount of security to employees: they feel like they have a bigger say in management decisions, and it's actually something that new people that we interview are really interested in. They're like, "Oh, wow, the council says we must only do 40 hours and mustn't do any crunch? That's not like my previous job".
GH I think there was the old gaming industry, and the new gaming industry, and I remember the time when Bigpoint and Innogames came up and were pretty vocal in the game industry and talking about revenue growth of 2,000 per cent. And the old industry was like, "It's just a bubble". And I think they were scared for their jobs and for other things. Because there was a shift in the market and the boxed market became more and more difficult. A lot of traditional developers also faced insolvency, like Ascaron, for example – a very traditional game company in Germany that I worked for. Phenomic went down as well. A lot of studios in Germany went down, or had very difficult times, but now they've simply adapted and adjusted, and that is the reason that the two sides are now growing together, because in the end we all want to do the same thing, right? We want to work on great products that are challenging, motivating, fun and entertaining. We now have the business model thanks to Korea, Japan and other countries where it was invented, and some clever German entrepreneurs picked them up and made them big in Germany, and reinvigorated the PC market. So we needed those entrepreneurs, in Germany in particular. They are the people that are driving the two sides getting together again. ■

REGION SPECIFIC
STUDIO PROFILE

Yager

It's one of Berlin's oldest studios, but the Spec Ops creator is no dinosaur



Founded 1999
Employees 130
URL www.yager.de
Selected softography *Yager, Spec Ops: The Line*
Current projects *Dead Island 2, Dreadnought*

BERLIN INSIDER

"At the moment, I think Berlin is one of the greatest cities on the planet. You have so many people from all over the world in Berlin now, and a lot of creators, which is really helpful. And even though housing prices are going up, it's still much cheaper than Hamburg or Munich, and that attracts a lot of people."
Philipp Schellbach





Situated in a waterfront building, the *Dead Island* team works at ground level while the *Dreadnought* team gets the better views from upstairs

STUDIO INSIGHT
Philipp Schellbach
Director of development



Spec Ops: The Line, Yager's powerful exploration of wartime morality, cleverly subverted genre conventions to carve out its own space. The studio itself is no stranger to standing apart, either, since it's one of the few remaining traditional development studios in Berlin – there's not even a whisper of mobile or browser games during our visit. But this elder statesman has close ties to the modern Berlin scene, director of development **Philipp Schellbach** tells us, and continues to evolve.

With *Dreadnought* and *Dead Island 2* in production, is this the first time you've run two projects simultaneously?
When we were doing *Spec Ops*, we had a second project. I can't talk about it, because it's under NDA, but unfortunately it got cancelled. So, yeah, it's the first time that we really have two projects in production – and it's great! When we ended with *Spec Ops*, we were about 80 people; now we're 130, so we really had to ramp up more to be able to do two projects. The projects aren't the same size, which is good for us, since I would have been scared to do two big projects in parallel – that's more tricky. But now we have a big triple-A project for console and PC in *Dead Island*, where we have about 80 people, and we have *Dreadnought* upstairs, which is about 35 people.

Both *Dreadnought* and *Dead Island 2* feel very different to *Spec Ops*.
Spec Ops, honestly, while it was a great experience for us as a studio, it was also hard from time to time. It was a five-year project and our art director always says he had to look at really cruel reference material, so now he really likes working on *Dreadnought* after five years of that!

Do you share tech across the two teams?
Yes, actually both projects are running on Unreal Engine 4. We also have a very good relationship with Epic – I'm part of the tech advisory board at Epic, which helps us to tell them which kind of features they should be working on.

With so many mobile companies here, do you still feel part of the Berlin scene?
We feel very much integrated, because we know most of the other guys very well. I'm good friends with Gabriel [Hacker], who's running the King studio, for instance. And it's also good for us, because we attract another type of developer, so there's no competition between us and Wooga or King. It means we enjoy more relaxed communication between our companies, too.

You changed the way you work after *Spec Ops* shipped – why was that?
Spec Ops was a long production and we had a couple of switches of direction in that timeframe – we started off as something closer to a *Ghost Recon* tactical shooter. We had Dubai at the beginning, but not the idea of sand. And one thing that always seemed to happen was that we had a breakdown in communication when the direction changed. We didn't really explain it well, and if people aren't behind a change or an idea, then it won't work out and they won't do their best to make it possible. So now we have a very flat hierarchy; there aren't really any leads. We have directors, but they don't tell people what to do – it's more mentoring. We want to encourage people to really think about the game and not just be puppets who do work that someone else tells them to do. We want them to bring in their own ideas and to fight for them. ■

Wooga

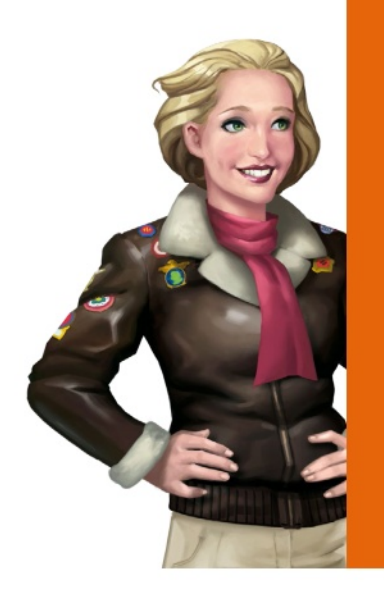
A fast-growing studio that's open to creative risks



Founded 2009
Employees 250+
URL www.wooga.com
Selected softography *Monster World, Diamond Dash*
Current projects *Jelly Splash, Pearl's Peril*

BERLIN INSIDER

"I like the chilled atmosphere. It's a big city with a lot of stuff happening, but I never feel stressed here. You go to Paris, London, all the big cities out there, and everybody's stressed. Here, people are relaxed. They just enjoy their time."
Alexander Mamontov





Wooga's home – all open plan, with no closed offices – used to be a bread factory, and still has giant flour dispensers hanging from the ceiling

STUDIO INSIGHT
Alexander Mamontov
Head of studio



Wooga wants its staff to fail. That is, the rapidly expanding mobile game studio isn't afraid to take risks and get things wrong along the way. Its recently instated Hit Filter process ensures that while there are many games in production at any one time, only the best make it to market. But, thanks to so-called Lab Time, which allows them to sharpen their craft before starting a new game, displaced staff don't lie fallow or, worse, lose their jobs. Head of studio **Alexander Mamontov** explains why its flexible approach is good for everyone.

Rather than using a centralised toolset, you allow your teams to choose their own tools, which is uncommon. Why make games that way?

We think that the success of a game depends greatly on the team making it. They know what they're working on best, and how to go about that in the best way. That's why we give a lot of autonomy to our guys. We know that if we stipulate people have to use specific tools, they'll lose part of their ownership of that project and they'll be forced to make decisions that they're not really happy with, which would be a destructive experience.

I understand why many companies working on huge projects use common tools to save money and time, but currently we see more negative points in that. We just let people choose what they feel is the best. And, of course, they're responsible for that! We're still trying to keep the feeling of a startup, and startups don't need to balance between effective tools and corporate standards – they choose what fits them best at any given moment.

So how does the Hit Filter work?

The idea appeared last year. The free-to-play game industry in general has a really turbulent atmosphere, and the market changes every week, with hundreds of applications appearing. So if we want to succeed, we have to adapt fast. This filter idea came in as we started to have a bigger share of the market. There are tens of thousands of games, and the chance of success is really low – that's why we need to concentrate only on the games that we believe will be top hits. We want to only work on the best games, and so that means starting many games, checking them constantly, and stopping the games that are not good enough.

And what about Lab Time?

It was one of the measures that appeared when we brought in the Hit Filter. By design, Hit Filter means stopping projects even when the team has got quite big, and so it's impossible for the whole team to start work on a new project. Lab Time means you can learn the things you want to, so developers and engineers can use the time to learn new engines or even languages, or develop a specific feature that's useful for the whole company. It works really well, and I'm happy to have it. It's important for people to be honest with themselves; for the Hit Filter to work, they need to be able to stop. If there was no Lab Time, people would be afraid to say that, because they might lose their role or job. We want to create a culture where failure is all right. We will make hit games, but we will fail many times along the way, and it's good to fail!

What are Wooga's ambitions?

It's really exciting to see how the audience for gaming has exploded, and our vision is that in five to six years, playing games – not just ours – will be as commonplace as listening to music or watching TV. ■



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Bigpoint

Berlin studio leads the charge with big-budget, hardcore browser games



Founded 2010
Employees 80
URL www.bigpoint.net
Selected softography *Drakensang Online*
Current projects *Game Of Thrones*

BERLIN INSIDER

"Prenzlauer Berg. We both live there – it's a nice area, it's eclectic, and very hipster-y."
Dan Olthen
"It's just super the opposite of corporate. It's so relaxed and chilled out. And it's super international."
Jonathan Lindsay





The *Game Of Thrones* team members sit under their house banners, while a hall decorated with swords provides a way to settle design disputes

STUDIO INSIGHT

Jonathan Lindsay
Producer, *Drakensang Online*
Dan Olthen
Producer, *Game Of Thrones*





Bigpoint had a turbulent 2012. The company axed 120 jobs and saw its CEO step down as its success stuttered. Today, however, the studio behind *Battlestar Galactica Online*, *Drakensang Online* and *DarkOrbit Reloaded* is practically unrecognisable. New attitudes to development, players and, perhaps most importantly, staff have reversed that decline and put the company in a stronger position than ever. We spend some time with *Game Of Thrones* producer **Dan Olthen** and **Jonathan Lindsay**, the producer on *Drakensang*, to discuss Bigpoint's new setup.

You've undergone a great deal of change. Was that difficult?

Dan Olthen The ownership of our games now comes from the team. There's no dictatorship; nobody's saying you have to do something. It's a combined effort and everyone knows that. I'm sometimes the voice of reason, but it's really an honour to work with my team, because some of them are legends. My lead designer was one of the leading designers on *Mirror's Edge*, for example. There are a lot of great people there, and I can trust them – I'm just there to help.

Jonathan Lindsay It was a big change in culture for the projects that already existed, and that was much more difficult, but being able to benefit from this new approach on *DarkOrbit* and *Drakensang* was amazing. *DarkOrbit* is seven-and-a-half years old, right? And *Drakensang* is three-and-a-half years old. So there were many opinions about what the focus of the games was, and the vision for them. And on both projects, we had to do this kind of vision finding – which is maybe a bit strange to do when the project's already live and super-successful. But if you don't have a clear vision for the game, it's going to be a very unfocused experience.

Which perhaps explains why you've held off from a concerted mobile push.

JL Yeah, we had to get our house in order, basically. And it's really hard to get when you have a studio with hundreds of people in it and your core competency is browser games and games like *Drakensang* – it makes sense to focus on that if you're not ready to scale and go get lots of mobile guys. And we weren't, because we were going through a restructure. That's why we bought Little Worlds Studio, because it's a perfect way to get that knowledge.

The stereotypical view of browser game studios is that they release games often, but Bigpoint seems more focused.

DO There are two different approaches to this industry. Either you're [firing games off] scattershot, and one game might be the hit, or you're more of a sniper. What we, and also other companies who are striving towards being snipers, do is iterate a lot – internal prototyping through incubators. I used to work for EA, and we had this incubator: let's try it out fast, let's fail fast, and see what will work. It's scattershot, but only internally.

JL And our games have much bigger budgets too. *DarkOrbit*, for instance, is several millions. It's a team of 35 people for the past seven years – you can do the maths and work out how expensive that is. It's a lot and [those games are] very successful because of that, because they're much higher quality than the games that are just made rapidly. ■

REGION SPECIFIC
STUDIO PROFILE

King

Free-to-play royalty expands its empire with a new studio



Founded 2013
URL berlin.king.com

BERLIN INSIDER

"Berlin is real – that's the most fun part. It's a city where you have everything from the more posh, fancy areas to the bohemian districts where all the artists are, and people are really down to Earth."
Gabriel Hacker





King's new office still smells of paint when we arrive, and one floor has yet to be occupied, but it's already a colourful and welcoming space

STUDIO INSIGHT
Gabriel Hacker
Head of studio



King's Berlin studio held its opening party just a few days before our visit, as evidenced by the balloons that still decorate its work spaces. Not that they feel particularly out of place: the office's most striking feature is the slide that wraps around its spiral staircase. After a couple of tests of that feature – for investigative journalism reasons, of course – we talk to head of studio **Gabriel Hacker** about King's new expansion.

What does King Berlin handle?
We are working on casual games, of course – free-to-play games. We're currently in the prototyping stage, and our first people started around mid-March and we are adding more people to the team all the time. I'll be able to talk a little bit more about the details of our game once we get the green light, but so far we're playing around with new gameplay mechanics in the casual space. It's a very exciting stage, and we can't wait until we'll be able to get the first reactions from our network of 345 million players.

As a King studio, how much say do you have in what you do?
We're an autonomous studio just like any other King studio, but we really value the sharing of knowledge between the other studios. King has been making casual games for over ten years, and that is a real strength. Our culture is actually a lot about sharing and being humble and open. We believe we are fast and fluid, and we are very passionate about what we do. We have so much knowledge in this company not only because of our recent success but because we have been in the business for over ten years, so it would be a shame not to use that experience. We now have a rather big organisation of game professionals, with experience from across the industry, but in the end it's ultimately our decision, here in Berlin, how much we put into the game.

And how closely do you work with the other King studios?
We work very closely with the other studios across Europe, and in particular with our CCO, Sebastian Knutsson, who's overseeing development worldwide. Sebastian is basically co-ordinating the portfolio, and he's also an integral part of the group of people who greenlight prototypes. King has also just acquired Nonstop Games in Singapore, so now also having a studio in the Asian market is very exciting for us.

How would you define King's games?
Bite-size brilliance. When you start *Candy Crush*, *Farm Heroes* or *Bubble Witch Saga*, there's aways something new, and you always require a little bit of luck as well. Even though I'm hundreds of levels into *Candy Crush Saga*, I still spend so much time on it. Whenever I have any downtime, even if it's about 30 seconds in an elevator, it's, "Awesome, let's fire up a level in *Candy Crush*".

What do you think the future looks like for King in Berlin?
We still have multiple positions which we're looking to fill, from game designers to game developers for both mobile and Facebook. We're really proud and happy about our new office space, and we're excited to fill it with talented people. I see this as an exciting opportunity for us to form the Berlin studio from scratch, with fantastic support from King, both from a corporate perspective and also in terms of knowledge and access to a huge network of players. ■

Berlin Partner and Medienboard

A wide-reaching support network is making Berlin an increasingly attractive location



Founded 1994
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Founded 2004
Employees 43
URL www.medienboard.de



Berlin Partner and Medienboard support in the region of 1,400 Berlin-based companies involved in videogame development and game services

BERLIN INSIDER

"Since the Wall fell, the city has been going mad. I like to travel and to meet new people, and in Berlin I have two feelings at the same time: I'm at home and I have my family and friends, but I constantly meet new people. So I have the excitement of travelling within my own home town, and that's super great."
Ina Göring

STUDIO INSIGHT

Birgit Reuter
Project manager, media, Berlin Partner
Ina Göring
Funding advisor, Medienboard





Berlin and Brandenburg offer a substantial amount of support for both established game companies and those looking to invest in the region. We meet with Berlin Partner For Business And Technology project manager **Birgit Reuter** and Medienboard's **Ina Göring** – two of the key people driving gaming's growth – to discuss what's on offer for developers.

Why should companies consider Berlin?
Birgit Reuter I think we really have an international boom right now. And that's because of the low living expenses and the creativity of the city – Berlin's young, hip, and everybody wants to be here. We provide special programmes where we can support companies with cash incentives on the investments they make for the next three years, and labour subsidies are also possible.
Ina Göring Companies can approach Berlin Partner for business funding and finding talent, and they can come to us with their individual projects. So they not only get funding for their company, but their game, too. And we can fund up to half of the whole cost, which is quite a lot of money. We've got a lot of really good feedback from the companies that we've worked with who say that it really helped them to make a start and to get their first project out. Our funding is important because developers can remain in control of their IP and it needn't be sold to a big publisher. It's really nice that we can support them in this way. We have so many really interesting educational institutions, as well, such as the Games Academy. We have everything here – main institutions like games.net berlinbrandenburg, G.A.M.E., BIU and USK have headquarters here in Berlin.

So there's a great deal of momentum?
BR Yeah, I think for the past two years we've seen a big international wave of companies arriving. It all started with Kabam last year, and some Asian companies from Korea and other places. And now King has arrived, of course, and the next big one will be ProSiebenSat.1, which is a German company, but it's a global one. It bought Aeria Games and now it's bringing all its game people from Munich to Berlin for a merger, which will form SevenGames. This studio will be a huge player in Berlin's game industry.

How do companies approach you?
BR Mostly, people know about us already and call us, or we get in contact with them through our networks. I go to trade fairs a lot and meet a lot of people, too.

Tell us about International Games Week Berlin, and how it's grown.
IG This was something we were involved with from the beginning – we initiated the process in 2004, and finally in 2007 we had the Deutsche Gamestage. It's taken place every year since then, and for the 2014 event we've changed the name to International Games Week Berlin to stress that gaming is not something German, but an entirely international business… There's a business convention called Quo Vadis, the DCP (German Computer Game Award), and A MAZE., an indie game festival. Then there's Gamefest, organised by the Foundation Of Digital Gaming Culture, and the Computer Games Museum, which we helped to bring here, and both of which are unique in Berlin. ■





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Kabam

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Selected softography *Dragons Of Atlantis*, *Kingdoms Of Camelot*
Current projects *Moonrise*





STUDIO INSIGHT
Kenneth Go
Head of Kabam Berlin

Kabam has grown from a handful of people creating games above a dim sum restaurant in Mountain View, California, to a global operation with more than 800 employees worldwide. Perhaps even more impressively, it has done so in the space of five years. Its recently opened Berlin office is headed up by **Kenneth Go**, and handles live operations, player experience, localisation, quality assurance and marketing. We ask him to describe how Kabam does business in his own words.

What is Kabam about?
Kabam is the leader in free-to-play games in the western world. We believe in making triple-A quality games for mobile platforms, and creating long-lasting franchises with a deep relationship with our customers.

What does triple-A mean in terms of mobile free-to-play games?
Free-to-play sometimes has a connotation of being lower quality in the traditional game industry, and we really want to change that. Some of our games in the past have been somewhat low fidelity in some people's minds, and I think that's been the case for a lot of companies. Especially in emerging platforms, with new business models, it's mostly about speed. We've shifted our focus recently to focus more on triple-A-quality games. We have a really amazing 3D fighting game with the Marvel licence called *Contest Of Champions* coming. And we have two really amazing action-RPGs coming out, one built by our San Francisco studio from guys who worked on the *Diablo* franchise. We have another game called *Moonrise*, which is coming from Undead Labs, founded by some of the people who did *Guild Wars*. So we're really trying to invest a lot in the quality of games.



Once a tobacco factory; now Kabam's offices

How has Kabam evolved to become a publisher of other studios' games?
Publishing is relatively new to us; we've only been doing it for a couple of years, but we've invested a large amount of resources into it. We have two different business units, completely separated, and they have different budgets and different resources, so there's no conflict of interests between the sides. So we can push as much as we want, and it's forecasted to be a large portion of the business going forward. But here at the Berlin studio, we're mainly focused on supporting the firstparty games. ■



JAMES LEACH

Postcards From The Clipping Plane

Conveniently ignoring the serious side of videogame development

Nothing is more off-putting than seeing tears on the face of a game developer. Normally there's an easily understood reason for the face-seeping. An expensive mountain bike has been stolen. An extremely obscure electronic musician has died. An anime convention has been cancelled.

It has been my fate to witness this several times in my career, but the last time was easily the most disconcerting. Two programming men of previously good and balanced character were openly weeping as they recalled the plot, and specifically the ending, of *Red Dead Redemption*. I, of course, never finished it, so I could only nod and do a sort of sympathetic listening face as the neckbeards sobbed and snotted. The trouble was I had to remain in the company of these guys because they'd come up with a plan. A game which involved a whole load of tiny sub-stories, all of which were designed to evoke strong emotions of one sort or another.

As small game ideas go, the idea of different chapters with very different feelings attached to them is quite a good one. People will remember the ones they like, and they'll be short enough to take up a bus ride or to discourage another person from talking to you in a social situation. Plus, shorter things are easier to write, probably. When the crying had finally subsided we decided it might be hard to get people deeply emotionally invested in a short game, but we could get around this by hiring an expensive composer. Music is a shortcut to the human soul, after all.

I went away to write a load of short, emotion-wrenching scenarios that would get overlaid onto the simple puzzly games the team were coding. Tumbling kittens, acts of gross injustice going unpunished, lost puppies, someone stranded as the last ship leaves – all these and more started to form into tiny emotional tales. It was sort of like doing haikus, or the messages inside greeting cards.

Another train journey to another meeting at the developer's HQ. This time the two guys were much happier. They liked some of my ideas,



They liked some of my ideas, especially tiny animals getting saved or hurt: a surefire route to the emotions they were after

especially tiny animals getting saved or hurt – this, they felt, was a surefire route to the heart-wrenching or uplifting emotions they were after.

It took a while for them to tell me the next step, though: they wanted me to grade human emotions in order. There was a sensible reason for this request – the boys planned to monetise the later chapters or stories. Apparently the plan was to make people pay for the best emotions. I'd like to say I recoiled in horror and ran screaming from this unfolding Orwellian nightmare, but frankly I was on an hourly rate, and more importantly the train back wasn't on an open ticket.

The programmers decided that happiness – the tumbling kittens event I'd written – would be the most sought-after emotion and would thus either cost the most or would only be available after the player had already spent cash on despair, anger and embarrassment. I argued that the first, free scenario should not be depressing or engender feelings of loneliness, alienation or self-hatred, simply because it might put people off. Fearing that some potentially cash-rich players wouldn't get far enough into the title to unscrew their credit cards, the programmer boys agreed. I was sent away to create more and refine what I'd created.

Much time passed, but eventually the programmers got back in touch. Things hadn't gone as smoothly as they'd expected, they explained. The sister of one of them worked for a mental-health charity, and after being told about the game at a Christmas gathering, had become shocked and angry. The sister's viewpoint hinged upon the rather old-fashioned idea that, while puzzle games were all well and good in themselves, making puppies drown if you failed was perhaps not such a brilliant idea. She even offered to try the games out on her young children – who were around the age of those we were targeting (ie, those with parents old enough to have app store accounts and credit cards).

It turned out that children don't appreciate the wide variety of emotions available to them. In particular they dislike failing at some tricky task and being responsible for the death of puppies as a result. So the programmers had a rethink. The puzzle games were still in, and you'd have to pay to reach some of the worst ones, which they were going to hide much later in the game. But the emotional element was being downgraded. To such an extent, in fact, that it wouldn't be in at all. So the developers and I parted company. As I left, I mentioned the ending of *The Last Of Us* and, as I disappeared round the corner, I caught a final glimpse of them holding each other and howling.

James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer whose work features in games and on television and radio

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